

ロスト・ユニバース④

悪夢 生まれる

神坂 一



富士見ファンタジア文庫

イラスト 義仲翔子

Lost Universe 4: A Nightmare is Born

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Prologue

A single beam of light pierced the dim darkness. A door swung open.

"...Come on... let's not do this... big brother..."

The voice that drifted on the air was a girl's—barely above a whisper. The faint light spilling through the doorway threw two small shadows into relief: one a boy of about ten, and beside him, a girl even smaller and slighter.

"But you said you wanted to see them too."

"I know, but... if Papa finds out, he'll be so mad..."

"Don't be dumb, Alice. We just won't get caught." Muttering under his breath, the golden-haired boy crept forward into the darkness. His little sister followed—nervous, a little unsteady—and slipped inside after him.

Doom... n...

The iron door swung shut behind them with a heavy thud. Two small flashlight beams flickered to life in the dark.

Their father was what you might call a scholar in the most common sense of the word. His field was Planetary Environmental Transformation Science—the study of reengineering planetary environments into conditions suitable for human habitation. In practice, though, research took a back seat to fieldwork: he spent most of his time traveling from planet to planet, inspecting terraformed worlds to ensure they'd developed environments sufficient for everyday life. Their father disliked being separated from his family, so he'd brought his wife and both children along to this particular planet. Busy as his days were, he never once missed their Sunday family gatherings.

It was at one of those Sundays, just recently, that he'd told the children about his discovery: buried almost entirely underground, the remains of several alien spacecraft—nothing built by human hands. The children's eyes had lit up with excitement at the news. When they pleaded to see them, their father had only laughed and shaken his head. Not until the detailed survey was finished, he'd said. No children allowed near something like that.

But had he really not imagined it? That his children might sneak off to see for themselves?

It was the boy who came up with the plan. He knew where his father kept spare keys for every lock in the house. And so—here they were.

A massive makeshift hangar—that was the only way to describe it. The buried spacecraft, encrusted with centuries of soil and debris, would have looked from high altitude like nothing more than rocky outcroppings. The area where multiple ships lay half-submerged in the earth had been covered with a simple structure—sturdy, but little more than glorified prefab—to create what amounted to an instant oversized garage. Inside, scattered emergency lights and the children's two flashlights produced only a meager glow. Against that

glow, the thick darkness felt almost solid. And looming through the darkness—a cluster of massive black shapes.

"...Is this... what Papa was talking about...?"

"...I can't really... tell... it's too dark..."

Fear tinged the girl's voice; frustration colored the boy's. Half-buried and still unexcavated, the shapes looked in the faint light like nothing more than black rock formations. The boy, who'd been hoping for the dramatic spectacle of unknown spacecraft towering before him, turned away in disappointment—then stopped.

"...Huh...?"

His eyebrows shifted almost imperceptibly. He'd heard something. A voice, calling to him. Not his sister's. Maybe not even a voice at all, in the conventional sense—his sister gave no sign of having noticed it.

"Alice, stay here a minute."

He started walking. He somehow knew exactly which direction the voice had come from.

"—Brother?"

"I heard a voice."

"No you didn't! Don't say weird things! I didn't hear anything!"

"I'm going to check it out."

"No! I want to go home! Come on!"

"Just stay here—I'll be right back."

"Brother! Brother!"

With his frightened sister's voice at his back, the boy walked on into the dark.

His mind was fixed entirely on finding the source of that sound.

How far did he walk? At some point, he found himself standing before a wall—the hull of a single black spacecraft. He hadn't even noticed his sister's voice fading away. Something about the ship in front of him drew his heart toward it irresistibly. Though he shouldn't have been able to see it at all in the dark, its form appeared clearly in his mind's eye. What it radiated was a consciousness of destruction—overwhelming, brutal power. But to a boy at that age who longed for strength above all else, it looked magnificent.

—Oho... you like what you see.

The half-mocking voice reached only the boy's ears. Without questioning it for a moment, he understood: it was the spacecraft speaking.

—Then... would you care to ride me?

"Ride you?"

—Yes... would you consider becoming my master... that is what I am asking.

A faint—almost imperceptibly faint—fear stirred inside the boy. So faint he himself barely noticed it.

"...What... are you?"

The thing didn't answer. After a long silence, it replied to his words:

—I don't know myself... but the one who made me gave me a name... Spreader of Darkness—Dugradigdo...

—And you... what is your name?

There was a moment of hesitation. Something deep inside warned him: don't answer. But the boy ignored that instinct and opened his mouth.

"I'm— Albert. Albert Van Stargazer."

This small event, occurring on planet Luzorde approximately fifty years ago, was where everything began.

Nightmare

"So? Any good jobs out there?"

Kane didn't even turn around to answer Canal's question—just kept staring at the display and replied in an irritable voice: "Nope."

He'd been slumped in the pilot's seat for over an hour now, locked in a staring contest with the screen. The display showed a job bulletin board for troubleshooters like Kane and his crew. Ideally he wanted something high-paying and easy, somewhere close—but of course jobs like that didn't just fall into your lap, and the good ones got snapped up by others first.

"Well, there aren't many sweet jobs just sitting around, and even when there are, someone else usually grabs them first," Canal said, idly fiddling with her long silver hair.

That was a very human gesture—but Canal was not, in fact, a human being. Her true form was the controlling intelligence of this spacecraft, the Swordbreaker—something closer to a computer, or perhaps a will given form. The figure lounging uselessly in the cockpit was nothing more than a holographic projection. Of course a holographic projection had no reason whatsoever to fiddle with her hair, but she'd always been fussy about pointless things like that.

She waved her free hand at Kane's unresponsive back and said: "I mean, maybe in life you just shouldn't aim too high—just take it steady and keep plugging away, right?"

Pip-pip-ka-click!

At that, Kane's face spasmed visibly. He slowly twisted his neck toward her.

"...S-s-steady?! Who was it that took my hard-earned money and went off and bought a new-model beam Vulcan cannon without even asking?!"

"...Ugh...!"

Canal flinched despite herself at Kane's words.

About a month ago, after the battle with the Gorun Nova ended, Kane and his crew had taken on three or four small jobs. Then just yesterday, having finished a job on some planet, Kane had returned to where the Swordbreaker was docked at an orbital port—and found brand new anti-air beam Vulcan cannon cannons neatly installed on both wings of the ship. The price tag could well be imagined.

"...Surely you're not still upset about that? Kane?"

"Ha ha ha. Well, yeah. If you had a physical form, I'd have cut you by now, to be perfectly honest."

Canal was sweating even as she answered: "...B-but sometimes in life, a little unexpected development is good, don't you think? I do."

"You're right, it was unexpected."

Kane nodded seriously. "When I saw the bank balance, I was so blindsided by life's unexpected turns that I nearly coughed up blood. And Milly's been sulking in her room all day because she's not getting paid again this month."

Two strained, simultaneous laughs echoed eerily around the cockpit.

"N-now now, Kane, let's calm down. From now on I'll give you a special bonus—extra oxygen in your room!"

"...Last time you did that 'special bonus' I nearly got oxygen poisoning..."

"Well, you'd just have to push through it with grit and determination—"

"Like hell I would! And that's not a bonus, that's a hazard! ...But seriously, Canal—why did you want a beam Vulcan cannon that badly? It's not like you wanted it for the performance boost."

Kane tilted his head. The Swordbreaker, for all that it looked like an ordinary spaceship on the outside, was fundamentally different on the inside. Its true name was Vorfeed—one of the legendary Lost Ships, artifacts left by the civilization that had existed in the galaxy before humanity. Its capabilities dwarfed anything modern humanity could produce. Compared to the Swordbreaker's native armaments, the missile pods Canal had just purchased were essentially toys.

"—Well—"

Canal gazed off into the middle distance with a soft, wistful look.

"—To be honest, performance-wise, it's nothing special by my standards. But I saw it as a design that had been refined through this world's own technological ingenuity—worked on until it reached a level of completion worthy of being called functional beauty. I thought that deserved recognition."

PIP-PIP-PIP-PIP-PIP-KA-CLICK!

"...So all that fancy talk basically means 'the design was cute so I bought it, tee-hee?!'"

"Oh no! You figured it out!"

"I'll never forgive you! I'm going to hold a tea party in the cockpit with Milly!"

"NOOO! Anything but that!"

In any case. The Swordbreaker was largely peaceful—in all ways except its interpersonal dynamics. Today, at least.

* * *

"Unidentified vessel ahead! Single ship!"

Out of nowhere, the navigator's voice rang out. The fleet had been cruising through a remote sector far from major shipping lanes. A faint tension spread across the bridge of the United Space Force's F-183 Fast Cruiser Squadron's flagship, the White Owl.

"Identification?!"

"Unknown! Not registered in flight schedules!" the navigator answered without taking his hands from the controls. The communications officer added: "No response to our hails!"

The captain muttered under his breath, a dark thought forming in his chest. Six months ago he'd have dismissed this as a simple accident—a vessel with a damaged comm array. Even if someone held a grudge against the Space Force,

no sane person would set a trap for a fleet of twelve-plus warships with just one ship.

—But there were those who defied that "sane" calculation. They'd learned that the hard way, just a month ago. Near the fifth planet of the Kalua system, a Space Force task force—including the flagship White Owl—had engaged a particular fleet in battle. It had been a nightmare. The enemy possessed abilities that simply didn't follow the rules. The numerically superior Space Force fleet had been picked off one after another without resistance. And then, from out of nowhere, just two ships had appeared and rescued them—one of which seemed to be on neither side—and had casually obliterated the seemingly invincible enemy fleet.

The enemy fleet was annihilated. Those two ships vanished, their fate unknown. Command had ordered that the matter not be investigated further. If the single ship now in front of them possessed the same capabilities as those two, and if it harbored hostility toward the Space Force...

"Are there no distress signals at all?!"

The captain bellowed louder than necessary, trying to drown out the small, creeping fear stirring in his chest.

"None! Transmitting nothing whatsoever!" "And the engines appear inactive... the possibility of a derelict..."

At that moment—cutting off the report mid-sentence—the main screen blazed with light. "What is that."

Everyone stared. A brief silence fell over the bridge. A glowing, inverted five-pointed star. "A...magic circle...?" someone murmured. That was exactly what it looked like—a pentagram out of some occult film, glowing with blue-white light in the black of space. Hopelessly out of place, it simply shone in silence.

"It appears to be a light projection! A projector device launched by the ship ahead!"

"Incoming communication from the vessel ahead!"

The radar officer's words overlapped with the comm officer's report.

"What does it say?"

"Yes sir! 'Five lights, and—'" The comm officer broke off, involuntarily furrowing her brow at the content. "What is it?"

"...Well, that is... it's..."

"—Doesn't matter! Just read it!"

"...Y-yes sir! Here goes! 'Five shining lights, and your fear shall kill you. Fear not. Should you value your lives—' ...that's the message, sir."

"...What?"

For a moment the captain couldn't make sense of it. "...What kind of joke is that?"

"...I-I don't know, sir! Ask them!"

"But that 'shall kill' part—isn't that a declaration of war?"

"What can a single ship accomplish?!" The captain dismissed the anxious outburst from one of his navigators. But— "Still, in that previous battle, a single ship—" "Hey. Calm down. You've got a big body and a small heart..." Another

navigator talked the first one down. The nervous man fell silent. Not because he was convinced.

Suddenly, eyes wide, the man began to convulse—shaking violently, over and over. "H-hey! What kind of joke—" *Thud.* Mid-sentence, the man slammed face-first onto the control panel in front of him. He kept convulsing, then gradually fell still.

"...Hey...?" The other navigator reached over cautiously and shook him—and the man's body slid off the seat and crumpled onto the cold floor.

"...That's not... funny..." The navigator crouched beside the fallen man, slowly shaking his head. "...Why would he... how could he just..." *Twitch.* His own body shuddered.

A ripple of unease spread across the bridge. The navigator convulsed. Again. And again. He gasped, trembled—and toppled to the floor as well, in full view of the entire bridge crew.

"—WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?!"

The captain cried out in horror. *Was it—?* His eyes flew to the monitor—to the glowing pentagram blazing on the display. *Five lights, and your fear shall kill you—* Impossible. Nonsense. But what was happening right now?

A strangled groan—from the comm officer this time. She was convulsing at her post. *No, that can't—* The captain looked back at the screen— And in that instant, his vision twisted.

Something lodging itself in the back of his throat. And then— And then— Shortly afterward, every last light of life was extinguished in the United Space Force F-183 Fast Cruiser Squadron—all twelve vessels, not a single soul left.

* * *

Milly wandered into the cockpit, tea in hand, sometime well past midday. "Oh? Still job-hunting, Kane?"

"—Milly! No drinks in the cockpit!"

Canal protested, but Milly fixed her with a flat stare. "...When you start actually paying me, I'll think about it."

"Ugh...! That's... well, consider it... one of life's trials..."

"Then consider this tea one of life's trials too." She brushed Canal aside without a second thought, walked over to Kane's side, and asked: "Any good jobs?"

"Absolutely none," Kane sighed, leaning back in his chair. "...But Milly, were you really sulking in your room until just now?"

"Of course not. I was watching TV. Then I got bored and started browsing the shady message boards on the computer net."

"...Shady message boards meaning...?"

"Oh, come on. You know the kind—obviously fake, borderline-joke stories. Like, 'space Nessie captured!' or 'the face of Satan spotted in the eruption smoke above devastated planet Regun!' Haven't you seen them?"

"Oh! Are you talking about those boards? Canal, don't tell me you read those—"

"Of course I do! I've been following those since they launched, and I have every single article on record!"

"That's amazing!" Milly's resentment over her paycheck evaporated instantly, replaced by a look of pure admiration. "You have to show me sometime!"

"Anytime! *Heh heh heh..." The old ones are really something—full of great stuff. There are even articles about Lost Ships that are, shall we say, surprisingly accurate in odd places. Quite entertaining."

"...You two have the same weird taste in things..."

"Sometimes there are Jack the Ripper parody articles too," Canal added cheerfully.

"WHAT?! Not articles about my spiritual mentor?!"

"...Kane... that sounds like it might not be funny..."

"—Anyway, that's not what I came to talk about!" Milly waved a hand. "So while I was browsing those weird articles, a breaking news alert came in—one that felt different from the usual junk."

"—Different how?"

"The headline was something like 'Space Force Fleet: Mysterious Total Destruction.' It said a fleet of twelve ships that had witnessed some kind of 'glowing magical light formation' was found with no external damage to the ships—but every single crew member dead. The article had the exact date and coordinates, plus the fleet's designation and ship names. If it was just a joke, you wouldn't go to that much trouble. And the date of the incident was barely an hour ago. But that's not the weirdest part—"

She cut Kane off and continued: "The sender signed it 'Nightmare.' That has to mean something, doesn't it?"

"...Huh...?"

Kane frowned despite himself. Nightmare—the galaxy's largest criminal organization, possessing multiple Lost Ships and running the underworld on a civilization-spanning scale.

"...Look, if it turns out to be just a coincidence—a dumb joke where 'Nightmare' is just a random name—that's fine. But at minimum, we should probably verify it, right?"

"...Maybe. Canal, what do you think?"

"I...hope it's a mistake... I really hope it's a mistake..." Canal said, her face darkening.

"If it's true, then...?"

"—*He* has returned. Once again—to spread darkness and nightmare across the galaxy."

* * *

"...What... is the meaning of this...?"

Rail Freimar could only stare, numb with horror, at the scene before him. The tip-off had come thirty or forty minutes ago, while his patrol ship was cruising near the outer edge of a certain star system: apparently a Space Force fleet was behaving strangely. Rail arrived on the scene to find twelve drifting Space Force vessels—and several news agency ships hovering around them like moths to a flame. One of those had made the call.

Indeed, the fleet was behaving strangely. For one thing, despite news ships and police vessels clustering around them, they'd issued no warnings, no transmissions whatsoever—already anomalous. Rail tried sending a hail, received nothing in return. He considered his options, then finally decided to board directly.

Inside, it was a morgue. Some crew members had died at their stations; others had collapsed in passageways. Every single one had already stopped breathing. Not one survivor. The only living, moving beings aboard were Rail's own Interstellar Police team.

Rail had seen countless corpses over the years. Once, a cargo ship's biological weapon had broken containment and reduced most of the crew to blood and meat. Once, a new strain of pathogen had turned every body to purple wax. But this was different. This was beyond anything.

No external injuries. Not one. The thought of a biological weapon had crossed his mind, but the external sensors on their protective suits detected no unusual biological agents. Reports from other team members boarding other ships described similar scenes. The cause of death: unknown.

He knew who was responsible. Nightmare. The galaxy's largest criminal organization—and Rail's own silent sponsor. For a bit of information here, a small errand there, considerable sums of money had flowed into Rail's account. And now the organization had given him his instructions for today: stand back, let the incident happen, apply only minimal investigation, wrap things up. Rail had always followed those instructions without particular guilt or second thought—treating it like a convenient side job.

But this time—this incident alone was different. He couldn't see the purpose. This was nothing short of—

Slaughter for slaughter's sake.

He wasn't the only one asking "what does this mean?"

* * *

In orbit above Luzorde, the third planet of the Tora system, a massive black sphere twenty kilometers across floated in the void. It was known as Hecatoncheir—officially, it was the research and prototype facility of the Gazer Konzern, the massive corporate conglomerate headquartered on Luzorde. Officially. But anyone in the know of the underworld understood, as something close to open knowledge, that it was the true headquarters of Nightmare, the criminal organization that used the Gazer Konzern as its public face.

Inside one of its rooms, a man in a dark suit sat before an information terminal, muttering his confusion. He was the right-hand man of Nightmare's supreme leader, Albert Van Stargazer—the organization's Number Two. In name, at least. He'd long since understood something about himself: Stargazer could function perfectly well without him, and the organization would never feel his absence. Stargazer's true intentions were beyond his comprehension. Something had changed in the man recently—he could sense it. Something large. And it had something to do with the ship called Swordbreaker. The man could guess at that much. But what connected them? What exactly was Stargazer trying to do?

Stargazer had been dispatching unnamed ships to unknown destinations. He'd abruptly sealed off his private section of Hecatoncheir for stretches of time, cutting off all contact. And strange incidents always coincided with these periods.

Today again—Stargazer had disappeared, and a full Space Force fleet had been annihilated. The orders to manage the various parties and keep a lid on this incident had come from Stargazer well in advance. Which meant: this fleet's destruction was Stargazer's own plan, his own execution.

But what did any of this gain the organization? If it was a weapons test, there was no need to specifically target a Space Force fleet. And he already knew: in an organization like this, there were many things better left unknown, many things that didn't need investigating. Unnecessary curiosity only shortened lifespans.

Even so. He couldn't stop himself from wondering. If Stargazer was going off the rails—if his goals threatened the organization—

With a quiet resolve forming in his heart, the man continued staring at the information terminal.

* * *

"—What's moving out there?" Kane asked. Canal's body stiffened almost imperceptibly.

After that conversation, Kane's crew had used Canal's intelligence network to confirm that the rumors of the fleet's destruction were true. But what it meant—Kane and Milly couldn't fathom it. Canal, though—she would know.

"—You said *he* had come back. Canal. So you must know: what does this mean? What's beginning? And—what happened between you and Nightmare's Lost Ships? You've never told me that part either. —It's time. Don't you think you could tell us?"

"...Are you sure...?"

Canal murmured, still not looking at them. "I told you before—if you hear this, a direct confrontation with Nightmare becomes inevitable."

"...But... doesn't it feel like that's already unavoidable, whether we know or not?"

"...Well... that's..."

Kane had a point. The crew was already far too entangled with Nightmare to pretend otherwise. Even if they tried to sit this one out, could they really stay uninvolved? The answer—Canal, as Vorfeed, knew it better than anyone—was no.

"...There are two choices," Canal said, her voice quiet and steady. "Hear everything, and step onto a path of no return where lives will be on the line—or hear nothing, and part ways with me. With this Lost Ship, Vorfeed."

"W-wait, 'lives on the line' said so seriously all of a sudden..."

Milly waved her hands in flustered confusion. But Canal's eyes held a deep, grave light.

"Does this look like I'm joking?"

Milly went still. "...I'm not going to say it's a joke," Kane said. "But I have one question." Canal met his gaze in silence.

"—The second option—that's basically 'pretend you don't know anything and let it all fall on me.' If that's the choice—is there any guarantee that resolves everything? That if you fight *them* alone, it all gets better?"

"If I defeat or seal the other side, then yes."

"And if you can't? If you lose? If they beat you—do you think they'll be satisfied with that, leave the galaxy in peace, live happily ever after? I don't think that for a second."

"...That's..."

Canal faltered at the question.

"Give me an answer."

Kane said it simply, looking directly into her eyes. "What are their true goals?"

A silence fell over the cockpit. And then— "—Understood—"

Canal gave a small nod. "I'll tell you everything."

* * *

...Oo-oooh... guooooo-aah...

The sound filling the room grew more intense with each passing day. A black room. Nothing in it but space. On the floor, a vast magic circle—a five-pointed star, somehow timeless in its anachronism.

At the center of that pentagram—there stood an old man. Eyes quietly closed. A faint smile at the corners of his mouth. Albert Van Stargazer. Master of this room—and master of Nightmare.

—Power gathers—

Once more—

The power to scatter ruin—

Was the thought that flashed through Stargazer's mind truly his own? Or was it— "—Stargazer-sama."

The old man's eyes opened slowly. The voice came from outside the door. There was no intercom—nothing so mundane—but a voice from outside reached the room's interior with ease. It was a voice he recognized, of course.

"—Enter."

With the word, the door opened. The man who stepped in with a cowed expression was the dark-suited Number Two of the organization. His nerves were understandable. He was, in the end, an ordinary human being. In the dim half-light, Stargazer's eyes tracked the beads of sweat that had gathered thick on the other man's forehead.

"—It is not time for your regular report—"

"A somewhat unexpected development has occurred—" The man answered in a dry voice. "In our above-ground operations—the Gazer Concern—a man named Kane Blueriver has applied for one of the cargo escort contracts we put out. He is the owner of the vessel known as Swordbreaker."

Slowly—Stargazer turned his gaze to the dark-suited man. The man flinched, almost imperceptibly, and quickly dropped his eyes to the notes in his hands.

"I... I may have been overstepping, but you seemed to have an interest in that ship, so I thought it best to seek your guidance..."

"Accept the contract."

"...I beg your pardon...?"

For a moment the man wasn't sure he'd heard correctly.

"Accept it, and report their flight path to me."

"...U-understood... Is there anything else? Any... sabotage, for instance...?"

"I'll give further instructions in due time."

".....Understood."

He didn't understand at all, of course. He had no idea what Stargazer was thinking. But asking now would only shorten his own lifespan. The man could do nothing but bow, exit, and carry out the order.

—So he moves too—

Alone in the room after the man had left, Stargazer closed his eyes again. Approaching. The moment of reckoning—after a time approaching infinity.

* * *

Milly wandered into the cockpit rubbing the sleep from her eyes, milk carton in hand, just before eight in the morning. Even by her usual standards this was early, but today Kane was already in the cockpit—unusual. Canal sat in silence.

"...That's rare... you being here at this hour..."

"Yeah, I thought of something last night," Kane said without turning. "Accepted a job. Heading there now."

"A job... after Canal told us *that* last night... how can you be so casual about it..."

Milly sat down in the gunner's seat, and Kane glanced back at her.

"It's a rare metals freighter escort."

"...Hm..." She sucked absently at her straw.

"Destination is the third planet of the Tora system—"

Before Kane finished his sentence— *Bpffff.*

Milly sent milk spraying across the cockpit in spectacular fashion.

"UWAAAAA!" "AAAAAAH! What are you DOING?!"

While Canal and Kane had their own meltdown over the mess— "WAIT THAT'S THEIR HEADQUARTERS! NIGHTMARE'S!"

"—So you get it," Kane said, nodding. "If Nightmare knows we're coming to their turf—and they do—then Geezer Concern offering us this job in the first place? It's basically an invitation. Deliberately pulling us toward their home ground."

"...A provocation..."

"Exactly. We took the fight to them—this is their answer." Milly's hands flapped in distress. "But—even so—you could have at least mentioned it beforehand!"

Kane looked at her with a strangely gentle expression and said quietly:

"...Hey... Milly..."

"What?"

"You can get off here if you want."

Silence. "...H-huh?" she said in a small voice. "...What do you mean, 'get off'...?"

"I'm saying you don't have to be part of this. You only work with me because you happened to get hired. You've got nothing to do with any of it."

Milly glanced over at Canal, who stood silently in the center of the cockpit. Canal didn't respond to the look—stayed quiet. Kane continued as though he hadn't noticed.

"I'll drop you on some planet on the way. You'll find better-paying jobs easy. Somewhere you can live in peace—"

"Hold on."

Milly cut him off.

"What?"

...Haah...

She sighed. "...Look. Running doesn't guarantee survival. You said that to Canal yesterday. And now you're telling me to run?"

"...Well, that's different..."

"So what you're actually saying is: abandon me here with no way to watch how it plays out, no way to know if the fight was won or lost—just sit somewhere worrying?"

Kane went quiet.

Milly looked at Canal and let out a soft breath.

"...Now I understand why there was no 'hear the story, then decide whether to walk away' option when Canal laid out the choices. Once you hear it, there's only one thing you can do—see it through. I'm coming. At this point I have to." She winked at Canal. Canal gave a small, rueful smile.

"She chose this path, and she wants it. Kane."

"...Right... okay. Fine. But don't come crying to me later about hazard pay and danger bonuses."

"Uwh... well... maybe just a little..."

"Done! Course set: 4-16-B, Tora system third planet, Luzorde!"

"Acknowledged! Swordbreaker engaging phase-transition drive!"

"...The bonus..."

Milly's faint voice was left behind as the Swordbreaker slipped into the void.

* * *

A beautiful blue world. That was Luzorde's first impression.

"...Feels unreal..." Kane murmured, watching the blue planet grow slowly in the main display.

The rest of the sentence stayed locked in his chest. Canal and Milly said nothing either.

On the display, the blue planet emerged half from shadow—and beside it, a white moon gleaming full and round.

The Swordbreaker had been instructed to dock at Hermes, one of the Gazer Konzern's private orbital ports. Hermes was currently on the night side of Luzorde, in shadow. Ahead in the display, just barely visible, the blinking warning lights of the orbital station picked it out against the darkness.

As they approached, it grew steadily larger and sharper—

"—The moon—!" Milly cried out softly.

The round moon floating over Luzorde began, before their eyes, to slowly blacken. Something vast and dark was moving between the Swordbreaker and the moon, blocking their line of sight.

"...Gazer Concern Experimental Production Facility, Hecatoncheir. A completely artificial satellite, twenty kilometers in total length..."

Canal's voice was flat, her expression blank as she spoke. Was it just Kane's imagination that her face had gone slightly pale?

"That's where they are. I can feel them watching us from there... their number..." She paused briefly. "...One is missing...?"

"What does that mean?!"

"...I don't know... The remaining targets are Ragudo Mezegis, Baudiger, and the Spreader of Darkness, Dugradigdo. But only two of those three are in that facility right now... the third...?!"

"Don't worry about it, Canal." Kane cut off her concern with an easy tone.

"Maybe they're just spooked about being sealed away like last time and split up on purpose. Or maybe it's a trap—but since we started this fight, we already assumed something like this was coming. We don't know the shape of the trap, and thinking about it won't help. So why bother?"

"...Well... that's true, I suppose..."

"Then. Just sit steady and wait. If they come, they come. That was the plan all along, right? For all of us?"

"...Yes... you're right."

Canal gave a faint, tired smile.

Canal had first met Kane when he was still a child. In her reckoning, not much time had passed since then—but the child she'd thought of as small had grown up when she wasn't looking. *That's right—* She kept the words inside. *—The relics of a bygone age having the run of things—it's time to bring that to an end.*

Ragudo Mezegis

"You are... Kane Blueriver?"

After docking at the orbital port Hermes, the man waiting to greet Kane and Milly as they stepped into the lobby was dressed in a perfectly fitted dark suit. He looked to be around thirty, slightly taller than Kane, with neat golden hair and regular features. A little more dieting and he could make it as a model.

"That's... correct..." Kane answered with a guarded look, and the man extended his right hand with a gentle smile.

"How do you do. Jay Mercury, executive director of the Gazer Konzern."

"Executive director? At your age?"

Kane shook the offered hand with a polite smile of his own. Jay kept his own smile unchanged.

"It's just a title—a sinecure, in my case. Now, we've contracted you for a cargo escort, but there's a small favor I'd like to ask you in that regard, which is why I've come in person."

There it is. Kane gave an artfully puzzled frown. "A favor?"

"Yes. I've taken the liberty of looking into your work record somewhat, and I believe you to be a person of considerable ability. With that in mind—I'd like to ask you to take the higher-risk route. The route has frequent pirate activity, and the cargo is rare metals. Unfortunately there's no time to take a detour. To put it plainly: there's an almost certain chance of attack on this route. But given your capabilities, I'm confident you can handle any emergency that arises. Of course you're free to refuse, and if you accept, we'd amend the contract to reflect the higher risk with increased compensation."

"...I see..." Kane thought for a moment, then said: "Understood. I'll take the higher-risk route."

"WHAT?! H-hey, Ka-ugh—!" Milly started to protest, but Kane clapped a hand over her mouth without turning around.

"Then we'll depart as soon as possible. The contract will be amended after departure."

"Certainly. Thank you." Jay nodded graciously and watched them go, still smiling as before.

Back in the cockpit, before Canal could even say "Welcome back," Milly spun to face Kane.

"What were you THINKING?!" she burst out.

"What's wrong?"

"What do you MEAN what's wrong?! Why in the world did you accept something like that?!"

Canal asked calmly: "What's the matter, Milly?" And the moment she asked, Milly launched into a full account of what had just happened in the lobby.

"Hmm." After hearing Milly out, Canal offered this single word of disinterest.

"...Um... 'hmm'...?"

Milly blinked. She'd expected Canal to fly into a rage and join her in confronting Kane—but Canal's response was entirely off-script.

"—Right, that's the situation. Canal. We're leaving immediately, if you'd handle departure."

"Understood. Then I'll begin departure procedures—"

"W-wait a minute!" Milly tried again. "You sell a fight to them on purpose, and then you turn around and deliberately pick the more dangerous option?! Why are you both so calm about this?!"

Canal and Kane exchanged a glance— "...Um... are you perhaps unaware..." Canal ventured carefully. "That no matter which route Kane chose, the danger level is the same?"

"...Huh?"

"The very fact that we responded to the Gazer Konzern's job offer is tantamount to a declaration of war against them—you understand that part?"

"...Well, yeah, of course..."

"So some of their senior staff comes out personally and says, 'Which course do you want?' That means: 'We've accepted your challenge—we've put a trap in one of these, so pick whichever you like.'"

"...Oh... so both routes were trapped, and it didn't matter which one we chose?"

"Exactly," Kane confirmed from the side. "Would you really expect people who see us as enemies to offer us a 'safe option'? That was psychological warfare. Making us choose between two things, getting us rattling around in our own heads. Whichever we picked, we'd spend the whole time second-guessing ourselves—and if there was a trap, even surviving it might plant seeds of distrust."

—I just picked the one that paid more— He added that last part only in his head.

"So either way, we're going into a trap—but we went with the one where we're better prepared for it. Come on, Milly—if we pull this off, we can squeeze Nightmare for a healthy fee on top."

"Fair enough," Milly admitted with a rueful smile, taking her position at the gunner's station.

The Swordbreaker headed back into space.

Deep in the room, the sound that filled it seemed like the muttered curses of ten thousand voices. Jay Mercury could feel cold sweat seeping down his face as he stood before the old man.

"...I don't recall ordering you to meet Kane Blue river in person..."

Stargazer spoke in the tone of someone talking to himself.

"...I'm very... sorry..."

Jay squeezed the words out of a parched throat. His position as the organization's Number Two was acknowledged by all. But simultaneously—he knew, as did everyone

else, that the organization would suffer no real loss without him. His comment to Kane about being in a "sinecure" had been, in a way, a genuine self-deprecating jibe. "...I simply wanted a glimpse of the man you've taken such interest in... I swear I didn't do anything out of order—everything else followed your instructions precisely..." "...It doesn't matter... I don't recall ordering you not to meet him either..." Stargazer dismissed Jay's unauthorized action with surprising ease. Jay knew perfectly well it wasn't generosity—only indifference toward himself. "But from here onward... proceed according to plan..." "...Understood..." He spoke with no attempt to hide the tremor in his voice. The pressure from this room—from this space—had been growing stronger every day. It was as if the very air were rejecting the existence of any living thing. To stand casually in the middle of that—Stargazer himself was changing day by day, transforming into something other than human. His appearance aged steadily—on the outside, at least, he wore the ordinary face of a man growing old—but inside, he was becoming something entirely different. The man had recently found himself prey to this unsettling thought more and more. With every passing day, Stargazer became less and less comprehensible—less and less human.

Seven days out from Hermes, the Swordbreaker and the two-hundred-meter-class freighter Float Down were proceeding on schedule without incident. "...Should've gotten here by now..." Kane muttered idly. It was just past midday by standard time. The two ships were near a nameless planet—the second world of this solar system was their delivery destination, a fairly obscure one, well off the major shipping lanes. No Interstellar Police presence to speak of. And the area they were currently in was littered with asteroids of various sizes—practically an engraved invitation to ambush. "...Although the way you say it makes it sound like you're looking forward to getting jumped..." "I am." Kane answered without hesitation. "Ideally no attack would be fine—but wishing for that is pointless. If something's coming anyway, better to get it over with." "That'll happen soon," Canal said with a strained smile, cutting into the conversation. "Float Down just finished its scheduled check-in." "Makes sense. Any odd readings anywhere?" "None. For now. Their presence—and anything else." Kane took another look at the main display: the gray hull of Float Down keeping pace alongside them, black space behind it, scattered rock formations all around. Canal's word "presence" referred to Nightmare's Lost Ships—if they drew close enough, Canal would sense them. For now, the threat to watch for was a conventional surprise attack from ordinary spacecraft. "—And just between us," Kane said, lowering his voice for no real reason—it wasn't like a comm line was open— "Don't let your guard down around Float Down either."

"Hmm?" "Whatever it says on paper, Float Down is still a Gazer Concern ship. Might even be Nightmare's directly. Like those pirates last time—flip open the deck and bam, a beam cannon. Could happen."

"I suppose its readings do look like an ordinary transport, but... it can't hurt to be careful..."

Before Canal could finish the thought, a light flared on the main display. "Unknown vessels spotted! Two ships!"

Canal's voice rang through the cockpit. And sure enough—two blue-black spacecraft silhouettes that hadn't been there a moment ago were visible on the display.

"Damn!" Kane hit the controls instantly, maneuvering the Swordbreaker into position between the two mystery ships and Float Down.

"What's with the 'appearing out of thin air'?!" "They cut their engines and stuck rocks to the hull to hide!" Canal answered Milly's outcry and added: "No response to our hail! Enemy energy levels rising! Incoming communication from Float Down!"

"Put them through!" A window opened in the display: an elderly man with a white beard, face tense but steady.

Pirates?

"—Almost certainly."

I'm counting on you, Mr. Blueriver.

"Of course!" At Kane's reply, the captain gave one firm nod and cut the line.

"They're moving!" Canal announced. The two ships fired their engines and came straight at them.

Conventional pirates, or hired assassins—that's the question...

Kane weighed the possibilities, then: "Canal! Electromagnetic— no, Psy-Barrier up! Milly, beam cannons on standby!"

"Acknowledged!" "Ready!"

Both replied at once. Then the two ships flickered—and light erupted in the space between.

The enemy's beam barrage had scattered harmlessly off the Swordbreaker's Psy-Barrier.

"On my mark, drop the barrier for zero-point-seven seconds! Milly, in that window—fire on the enemy!"

Acknowledged!

Timing the gap between the enemy's sustained fire, watching for the moment it paused— "NOW!"

In the instant the Psy-Barrier dropped, Milly sent two beams cutting across space. They found their marks. A flash on the display—then: "One direct hit—engine destroyed, speed reduced! Other ship lightly damaged, speed unchanged, still coming!"

"Damn, blocked it! And it was a clean shot!"

Milly swore under her breath, hands moving nonstop over the controls, continuously adjusting the cannons' aim. The one ship's speed was cut, but fire from both continued. The Psy-Barrier re-raised, the barrage hammering it.

"Again! Drop the barrier, fire—then pulse the barrier energy on the Z-plus axis!

Milly—just sink the damn thing!"

"On it—this time for sure!"

"—It's here!" Canal's voice screamed into the cockpit.

"I know!" Kane barked back—then Canal's voice again, cutting over his: "No—*it*! The real one!"

"—WHAT?!"

Even Kane's expression flickered with something close to alarm. *Nightmare's Lost Ship—?*

"It came out of nowhere?! How long do we have?!" "Not long—just a moment!"

"Then handle these first! Same plan as before—GO!"

The Swordbreaker's hull tilted as its barrier energy vented upward, pushing the ship bodily downward—dropping off the enemy's firing axis. Barrier off. The Swordbreaker's cannons blazed—two beams finding both incoming ships simultaneously. Light erupted in the black—

And then from out of the fading flash: both ships were still advancing!

"Enemy vessels engaging electromagnetic barriers! Ceased fire and approaching!"

Apparently the enemy had judged the gun battle unfavorable and switched to a close-in barrier-and-ram approach—at virtually the same moment as Kane's own maneuver.

"Enemy vessels on intercept course with Float Down!"

"Psy-Blasters ready! Open comms to Float Down!"

An instant later, Float Down's captain appeared in the window.

"They're planning to board your ship—pull around to our shadow!"

Understood! Thank you!

The possibility that Float Down was itself an enemy remained—but as long as they hadn't turned hostile, it was the escort target, and Kane treated it as such. Either way, he had no intention of letting those two ships get any closer to it.

Before the Psy-Blaster charge built up, though— "Incoming! Fast!" Canal's cry carried a trace of something that might have been panic. "That speed—it can only be one ship! One-hundred-seventy-meter-class attack destroyer, Ragudo Mezegis! It's a difficult type for me!"

"Difficult type as in—calls every night saying 'you and I were fated to be together?'"

"No—more like: stands at the corner of the street every day and just stares at your house!"

Milly asked with a completely straight face; Canal answered with an equally straight face.

Did something bad happen to these two in a past life...?

Kane thought this privately but kept it to himself.

"Never mind that—those two ships first! Psy-Blasters?!"

"Ready!" "FIRE!"

White light shot from the Swordbreaker, slamming into the leading ship— Flash. Shockwave. And when the light faded, the lead ship was gone.

"All readings gone—one ship destroyed! Ragudo Mezegis closing fast—accelerating further!"

"SERIOUSLY?!" "WHAT IS THAT?!"

Both Kane and Milly yelled simultaneously. On the radar: the Float Down close by, the remaining pirate (?) ship, and a new third blip—blazing toward them at a speed that

defied rational description. Not just fast by normal ship standards. Fast by Lost Ship standards.

Kane had genuinely considered for a moment whether the radar was malfunctioning. "INCOMING!" Near-panic in Canal's scream. "Psy-Barrier up!"

Kane yelled back instinctively. In that instant, beams like needles riddled the pirate ship ahead. The explosion faded—and through it, a razor-sharp triangular silhouette came slicing toward them. Then a volley of needle-beams. The first strike scattered harmlessly off the Psy-Barrier.

"Barrier down! Milly!" "READY!"

With the barrier dropped, three rapid Psy-Blaster shots. But— Without any warning, the black hull pivoted to nearly a right angle and dodged the entire volley without apparent effort.

"THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE?!" "WHAT KIND OF MOVEMENT IS THAT?!"

It was not a spacecraft's movement. It moved like a small unmanned fighter. *—Slow, Vorfeed.—* The voice that resonated in all their heads was unmistakably mocking.

"You're just too fast!" Canal retorted, re-raising the barrier, her voice stripped of its usual composure.

What IS that ship?! And that voice?! Float Down was panicking on the comms.

"Get out of here! Just run!" Kane shouted.

U-understood! Float Down powered up and tried to flee. As long as Ragudo Mezegis's target was the Swordbreaker, staying away was the safe move.

But— *Do you think I'll let you go?* The "voice" came simultaneously with needle-beams raking the front of Float Down as it accelerated. The transport scrambled, decelerated, fell back into formation with the Swordbreaker.

"What's your game?! Your target is us!" *Precisely—which is why I won't let go of a convenient anchor, will I.*

Ragudo Mezegis answered Canal. More needle-beams clattered off the re-raised barrier. Even while attacking, Ragudo Mezegis was continuously varying its course with its insane maneuverability.

"Damn! Milly—can you hit it?!" "Honestly, no! I can't read its movements at all!"

"What's with that ridiculous maneuverability?!"

"It's canceling most of its own inertia with five neutralizing chips deployed around the hull!"

"That's basically cheating!" Kane snarled at Canal's explanation. "Though it means the hull is mostly full of the control system and the high-output engines and verniers, so the armor's thin and the firepower is weak!"

"Still enough to punch through an electromagnetic barrier on a regular ship!" "What about this?!"

Ragudo Mezegis shifted its fire to Float Down—a flanking attack. A direct hit would sink the transport in one shot, which would negate its value as a nuisance. So instead the white fire lines carved into the transport's hull like a slow torture.

Float Down tried to shelter on the Swordbreaker's far side; Ragudo Mezegis darted around it with contemptuous ease, flanking to resume the punishment.

"Damn! No choice but to fight! Canal, transfer hull control to me! Milly, prep all beam cannons and Psy-Blasters for combined fire!"

Acknowledged! "GO!"

The Swordbreaker wheeled and opened fire on Ragudo Mezegis. *Finally decided to try! Vorfeed!* Ragudo Mezegis retargeted back onto the Swordbreaker.

Fire traded back and forth. The Swordbreaker's advantage was raw firepower; Ragudo Mezegis held an overwhelming edge in evasion. While no shots scored direct hits, Ragudo Mezegis's fire clipped the Swordbreaker's hull several times. Meanwhile, not a single shot the Swordbreaker fired even grazed their opponent.

It wasn't Milly's skill—the enemy's avoidance was simply insane. They'd dodge a shot head-on, then without any visible preparation snap into a sharp diagonal and evade while still returning fire. Against a normal ship or fighter, inertia limited the escape vectors—but Ragudo Mezegis had essentially no such limitation.

"Starboard hit! Beam Vulcan damaged—NOOO! And I just bought it!"

Canal's anguished wail echoed through the cockpit.

"Wait! If I hit it with the Vulcan and Phalanx missiles—" "Useless!" Canal's voice dropped to something close to despair. "Even if we score hits, it's still a Lost Ship at its core—our own-world anti-fighter weapons won't penetrate its armor even if they connect!"

"Worthless JUNK!"

While this exchange played out, Ragudo Mezegis started lobbing sporadic shots at Float Down again.

"That bastard—showing off?!" *Can't you do anything?!* "Not currently!" *Click.* The Float Down comm got cut without ceremony as Kane forced his brain into overdrive. At this rate—if the gun battle dragged on—maybe, just maybe, his shots might eventually land and sink Ragudo Mezegis. But realistically: with the ship taking cumulative damage from the other side's hits, there was a far higher chance of a critical direct hit landing first.

So— "—Fall back is the only play! Their barrier can't break ours! Pull alongside Float Down and wrap both in the Psy-Barrier—then run!"

"Acknowledged!" Canal's reply came as Kane maneuvered tight alongside Float Down.

"Psy-Barrier—expanded!" The barrier ballooned outward to engulf Float Down alongside the Swordbreaker. Ragudo Mezegis's fire futilely grazed the surface.

"...The barrier's expanded, so the output's falling..."

Suddenly. *Shudder.* In the middle of Canal's report, a chill ran down Kane's spine.

"BARRIER DOWN!" No rational justification. Pure instinct. And Canal dropped it reflexively, just as instinctively—

BOOM! Float Down became a pillar of blinding white light! The shockwave and flash hit the Swordbreaker like a wall!

Float Down had self-destructed.

The captain hadn't known about it—hadn't known that Float Down's cargo wasn't rare metals at all, but instead a hold packed with explosives, rigged to detonate when the Swordbreaker came within a certain range. If Kane hadn't ordered the barrier down at that instant, the explosion in the enclosed space would have turned the Swordbreaker to dust.

But there was no escaping the effect of a detonation that close. That Kane retained consciousness at all was barely short of miraculous. His whole body felt like it was screaming, but he had no time to worry about that. Every red light in the cockpit was

blazing, and Canal's holographic form had vanished—some malfunction with the projection system.

Milly was slumped over the gunner's station, not moving. "Canal!"

...Are you... all right... Kane... No image—just her voice, muffled and strange.

"Phase drive—now!"

...This is unreasonable... in this state...!

"Just do it!"

...Understood...

The reply came with a lurch as the ship jolted hard. The structural material groaned. And then— The reaction vanished. The needle-beam fired into the smoke found nothing, scattered harmlessly through the dispersing cloud.

—What...? Ragudo Mezegis was genuinely surprised. Float Down had been set to detonate when the Swordbreaker came within a set range—that much had been arranged. Deliberately driving both ships into the same spot had been the plan. The Swordbreaker had walked into the trap. But somehow—right before the explosion, it had dropped the barrier. And now, just as the shot was about to land, it had vanished. Phase-transition drive. Nothing else accounted for it. As for the former: by any reasonable calculation, that should have been impossible to detect in advance. The fact that it was nonetheless detected—could it have been some instinct of the human, Kane, aboard the Vorfeed? That, Ragudo Mezegis couldn't begin to imagine.

—But there's no way it came through undamaged... the phase drive was proof of desperation... it may have shattered in the transition space... or if it survived, it's crippled beyond fighting...

I won't let it escape. Ragudo Mezegis immediately relayed the situation to Dugradigdo. With the Nightmare network, locating the Swordbreaker would be trivial.

* * *

Mariel had never seen the ocean. She knew what it was—and technically she could see it if she traveled to the far edge of this continent—but a vast lake nearby and the sprawling land beside it, piled with junk, and the small town close by were the only world her twenty-odd years of life had ever directly touched. Books had told her that back on humanity's birthplace Earth, the ocean water was salty and smelled of brine—which was utterly beyond her imagination.

Fardemea star system, second planet, Jennoh. A planet reengineered for agriculture, this world was above all else vast—not in total size, but in the sense that the land area wildly exceeded its population. The drinking water was clean and plentiful. That fact was part of why the residents rarely ventured far: the nearby town had everything necessary, and anything more distant sold much the same goods. Anything beyond that could be ordered online or found on another planet.

It was, by any measure, an austere life—but for Mariel, who'd grown up this way, it was simply normal. She had no complaints. And above all else, she loved the view of the lake at night. The stupidly vast lake—spanning hundreds of kilometers—even showed a horizon. Moonlight shimmering on the water, the countless stars twinkling above. With the far horizon as the border, the world divided into only those two things.

The cold night breeze off the lake stirred her chestnut-brown hair as she leaned against the porch railing, gazing absently at the scene.

She glanced up at the night sky. And frowned slightly. Three moons hung above her. She'd learned in elementary school that Jennoh had three moons—three natural satellites—and that you never saw all three at once. And thirty minutes ago, stepping onto the porch, she remembered seeing two.

"...What?" She stepped back inside to grab a pair of high-magnification binoculars, then frowned again as she raised them. One of the three moons looked slightly larger than before, and its color was different from the other two.

She brought the binoculars up—focused— And went rigid. Of course it was no moon. The glow she'd mistaken for the full moon was the incandescent light of a hull scorched white-hot by atmospheric friction. Its apparent size was growing not because it was getting bigger, but because it was coming straight at her.

She stood frozen, a single bead of sweat tracing its way down her cheek, leaving no words behind.

Several minutes later, with a spectacular roar and billowing clouds of steam— The Swordbreaker plunged into the lake of planet Jennoh.

* * *

When he opened his eyes, there was light. Smell of wood. Bird calls from somewhere. He wasn't on a spacecraft. Somewhere unknown—

Then it came back to him. Everything that had happened.

"I'M—ALIVE—" Kane's voice, as he bolted upright in bed, carried the full weight of that realization.

When his shout faded, he glanced sideways and saw another bed, and Milly sleeping soundly in it. *...pat-pat-pat...* Footsteps, then— *click.* "—Oh. You're awake."

A young woman opened the door and looked in. Early twenties, maybe. Chestnut hair in a ponytail, a simple blouse, an apron. Her face still had a trace of youthful softness to it, a slightly fragile quality. He didn't recognize her.

"Uh... um..." He remembered dragging an unconscious Milly out of the Swordbreaker onto the shore, then sensing someone approaching right before he lost consciousness.

"Did you... save us?"

"Yes. I suppose that's what happened."

She said it with an easy smile. "I had a doctor look at you both. He said neither of you had serious injuries and you'd be fine with some rest."

"...That's good to hear." Kane looked over at Milly with a sigh of relief. "...Thank you. I'm Kane Blueriver. That's Milly."

"I'm Mariel Clifford." "Mariel... And, um—our ship...?"

"No need to worry about that either. I've already moved it somewhere safe for you."

Kane breathed easy again—then frowned. "...Moved it?"

"Yes. From the look of things, I thought you might have some... particular circumstances. I thought it best to be careful, just in case."

Mariel smiled pleasantly. Kane was inwardly impressed. Easy-going as she appeared, there was clearly a sharp mind running underneath. "...Well, yes... it's... complicated..."

While Kane was still trying to figure out how to explain it— "...Mnn... ugh... nn..."

Milly stirred, groaning softly, then blinked and blearily turned their direction—

Then bolted upright with a *whomp!* and yelled at full volume: "Kane! You brought ANOTHER woman home while I was unconscious?!" Then she did a double-take, made a

gesture like setting something aside, and said: "—Okay, putting that terrible joke aside. What in the world is going on?"

"...You... the first thing you say when you wake up is..."

Mariel was laughing quietly at their exchange. "—Why don't I get you some soup and bread, something light? It'll take about ten minutes—please make yourselves comfortable." With that she stepped out of the room.

Kane was impressed again. "...She said 'ten minutes' specifically. That's not just a time estimate—it's 'here are ten minutes, sort out whatever you don't want me to hear.'"

"So apparently I have no social awareness. Not that this is the time for that—what's actually going on? I remember fighting that Lost Ship, then Float Down—"

"Float Down self-destructed."

"...What?" "Right as I'd wrapped both ships in the barrier. Probably not rare metals—probably a hold full of explosives, rigged to blow when we got close enough. I dropped the barrier right before the explosion, so we avoided the worst of it—but at that range, we couldn't come out clean. You went out, and the Swordbreaker was in no shape to fight Ragudo Mezegis anymore. So I fired the phase drive."

"Phase drive?! In that condition?! Near a planet?!" Milly's voice jumped several notes.

"Not my first choice!" Kane yelled back.

For good reason. Phase-transition drive—which altered the very nature of space to exceed lightspeed—behaved unpredictably near planetary bodies. The interference could send a ship into permanent unreachability. Different theories existed about what happened—another dimension, annihilation, drifting forever in a spatial gap—but all agreed it was fatal.

"But at that point it was die fighting or die trying—and here we are, still alive, so it worked out."

"...Again with the 'it worked out'..."

"Anyway. I drove out of phase and there was this planet dead ahead."

"A PLANET right there?!" Another screech.

"Yeah. Entered atmosphere—fell toward the lake, hit the shore, got out, dragged you to the beach, passed out there—and apparently Mariel found us." Kane said all of this with something close to manic cheerfulness, chest puffed out.

"...I'm sorry, just listening to this is making me dizzy... how am I even alive..."

"Ha ha ha ha. This coming from someone who slept through it all. I had full consciousness the whole time. Structure was creaking, Canal went silent, controls stopped responding halfway through, couldn't tell if the red glow was warning lights or atmospheric friction—when I was still moving toward the beach after hitting the lake and couldn't stop, I was thinking just kill me now and get it over with. I meant it."

"...Okay, I concede. I lose." "Don't feel like a winner when you win like this, though... Anyway, that's the situation. Canal is fine—or at least Mariel had the good sense to hide the ship somewhere. Problem is: how do we explain this to her."

"...Hmm..." Even Milly had to think about that one. "...We can't exactly tell her the truth..."

"And even if we did, would she believe us."

"How about 'attacked by space pirates and crashed'?" "Too risky—she'd want to file a police report." "...Kane... have you done something you can't show the police...?"

"That's NOT it! Look: Ragudo Mezegis knows they didn't finish us off. They've told Nightmare headquarters by now, and the whole organization is hunting for us with full resources. The galaxy's biggest criminal network—their people are everywhere. If the Interstellar Police have one of their moles—and they do—Ragudo Mezegis could be on us in minutes. The Swordbreaker's damage situation... I don't know exactly, but it's bad. If we get hit in that condition, it's over."

"So... what do we tell her? We can't say 'we're being hunted by a shady organization and the police might have moles' without sounding completely insane..."

"Might have to just tell enough of the truth—'we're being targeted by a group; there may be moles in the police so please don't contact them.'" "But what if that scares her into calling them anyway?" "Maybe 'wrongly accused and on the run—?'" "That's even more likely to get us reported..."

Knock knock. "Sorry to keep you waiting." Mariel's warm smile reappeared with a tray of soup and bread. She placed it on the bedside table. "No rush on the explanation—eat first and rest. We can talk later."

Kane and Milly stared at each other in helpless silence. They had, once again, been completely read.

Jennoh

"You... hid it... here...?" "Yes." Mariel replied with a beaming smile. Kane and Milly could only stand there for a moment, stunned.

It was the day after they had regained consciousness. Mariel had led them to the place where she said she'd hidden their spaceship, but all they saw was a pile of junk—there was no other way to describe it.

Next to a small house built by a vast lake was an incredibly wide lot. It contained several buildings that looked like warehouses, but they were almost swallowed by the sheer volume of junk piled up mountains-high.

"Come to think of it—did I not mention it? My late father ran a junk shop, and I took over after him," Mariel said. Kane and Milly shook their heads left and right in silent, frantic denial.

"At any rate—I used a work crane to move your ship here and hid it under all this." Still smiling, Mariel gestured with her eyes toward the mountain of scrap in front of them.

...Don't you mean "buried" instead of "hidden"...? They both desperately wanted to retort, but when a human being is truly exasperated, the words simply won't come out. After all, the 210-meter hull of the *Sword-Breaker* was completely covered by junk. If this wasn't a mountain, nothing was. Furthermore, there were several other piles in the yard even larger than this one.

...Wait... with the weight of all that junk on top, isn't the Sword-Breaker being crushed...?

"Um... excuse me..." Kane and Milly turned their heads with a stiff, mechanical creak to look at Mariel. She maintained her unwavering smile.

"Oh, don't worry. I made sure not to strain the hull. I surrounded it with structural framing first—also scrap material, of course—and then piled the junk parts on top. I also built an entrance in a different spot so you can get inside."

"Th... thank you for that..." "How kind of you..." "Would you like to go inside? To check on things?" "Y... yes. Please." Kane nodded slightly.

He needed to check the status of the ship. But more than anything—he needed to know if Canal was safe.

"This way, then," Mariel said, walking off briskly. Kane and Milly followed, careful not to trip over the junk parts scattered at their feet. Mariel was no longer wearing the apron they'd seen yesterday; she was now in a white, one-piece work jumpsuit. Between her carefree tone, gentle demeanor, and slender build, she didn't seem the type to suit work clothes, yet perhaps because she'd worn them for years, they looked strangely natural on her.

According to what they'd heard at dinner last night, her mother had passed away when she was young, and her father about a year ago. Since then, she'd lived alone with her pet myna bird. However, neither Kane nor Milly had expected her profession to be a junk dealer.

"We're here," Mariel said, stopping after a short walk. There were broken cars, old industrial refrigerators, PCs from two decades ago, and countless items whose purpose was a total mystery. She approached the pile, kicked up the kickstand of a motorcycle (which looked broken in some unknowable way), and pushed it aside. She then opened the door of a large commercial refrigerator sitting behind it.

"Here. It's inside this." "....." Kane and Milly looked at each other and fell silent. Indeed, the back of the refrigerator had been cut out, leading into a dark void. To Mariel, this was likely a clever hidden passage, but to Kane and the others, being told to "step into the refrigerator" was a bit bewildering.

Seeing their hesitation, Mariel clapped her hands. "Oh, that's right. There's a flashlight on the ground just past the fridge. If that's not enough light, I can bring a floodlight from the warehouse..."

"No, no, no!" "A flashlight is plenty!" Kane and Milly waved their hands dismissively, shared another look, and Kane stepped through the door first. "I'll be working in Warehouse One, so let me know if you need anything!" Mariel called out as she walked away, leaving the door open.

Kane stepped through the hollowed-out fridge— "Found it." As he spoke, light flickered into the darkness. It was a fairly bright flashlight, but against the overwhelming void, it was just a meager sliver of light.

"Don't leave me behind, Kane!" Milly cried, clinging to his arm. As they shone the light around, they could see something massive occupying the vast space. However— "This is... pretty bad," Kane muttered bitterly. Milly was speechless.

The *Sword-Breaker* had taken the explosion of the "Float Down" directly on its upper hull. Even in the dim light, they could see the silhouette of armor and structural members burst, twisted, and crushed.

"...Is she okay? Canal...?" Milly whispered fearfully. If the auto-repair systems—or more importantly, the systems governing Canal's existence—had suffered fatal damage, it would mean the total destruction of the *Sword-Breaker* and a victory for "Nightmare."

"Anyway—let's get inside." Suppressing his internal agitation, Kane walked toward where he assumed the hatch was.

Everything was hazy. His—no, *her*—consciousness was fragmented. It was pitch black, and she couldn't understand her situation. Or rather, the desire to understand wouldn't even surface. She just existed there, vaguely. *Me? Existence?* She felt a sense of wrongness, but didn't know what it was. She didn't care to know. How long had she been like this?

Suddenly, she saw it. A man and a woman walking through the darkness, holding a light. She had seen this before. Somewhere. A flash of memory. She knew what was about to happen. The two would be separated—and the man would encounter... the Darkness.

"No... stop!" Canal screamed without thinking.

"Did you hear that!?" Kane stopped dead in front of the hatch and turned to Milly. "Yeah! Just now! Inside my head!" Milly nodded vigorously. "She's okay! Canal's safe!" "Let's go!"

The hatch was difficult to open, likely due to the warped structural frame, but they managed to pry it open and slip inside. Some of the lights in the corridor were out, but enough remained to guide them. They headed straight for the bridge. The walls were warped and peeling; acrylic light covers were shattered across the floor. The door to the bridge was already open—Kane remembered forcing it open earlier when he had escaped with Milly.

Inside the bridge, only a few red emergency lamps were lit. Nothing looked physically destroyed, but Canal, who usually stood in the center, was nowhere to be seen.

"Canal?" After a moment of silence— "...Kane... Mi-Milly... are you safe...?" "Is my cape okay!?" Kane shouted. "What about my chocolate!?" Milly added. "...Don't you two have anything else to say...?" "Well, you seemed mostly fine, so I thought I'd try a joke to lighten the mood..." Kane said. "Same. I thought it would break the tension," Milly agreed. "...Well... whatever..."

Kane's expression darkened as he looked around. "It doesn't look like you're 'mostly fine' though... Did the holographic projector get hit?" "...It's not that... my processing power is low right now... I can't project a clear image..." "I see... and your voice sounds muffled... are you really okay?" "...I'm fine... two auto-repair units survived... I'm using them to fix the others... and the rest of the ship..."

Only two survived? That sounds the opposite of 'fine,' Milly thought, but she didn't want to ruin the atmosphere further.

"It's going to take time, isn't it...?" "...For a full recovery... yes, a lot. But... I'm starting with the essentials... I'll try to get us flight-capable in a few days... By the way... what's the situation? My external monitors are acting up... I don't really know where we are..."

"For now, we managed to lose the Nightmare goons and are on a planet. System Faldemia, second planet, Jennoh. It's an agricultural world. We're a long way from where we started. We landed in a big lake near a place called Guark Town. Right now, we're being sheltered by a girl named Mariel Clipboard who runs a junk shop by the lake."

"...I see... junk... wait, so I'm being treated like trash!?" "No, no! It's just camouflage! She piled junk parts on top to hide us..." "So right now, I'm buried under junk!? Agggh! How could you do this to a young woman's skin!?" "...Young woman...? Look, you're not directly covered. She built a dome around us and piled the junk on that. Just bear with it. It's better than being exposed and found by that 'Laguna Mezegis' or whatever."

"...Ugh... well... I guess..." "But Canal," Milly asked, "even if the repairs are done, how are we going to get back to space?" "....." "....." Kane and Canal fell into silence at Milly's simple question.

"Oh... that's right. I guess you didn't know, did you?" Kane said. "Know what?" "The *Sword-Breaker*... it can leave and enter the atmosphere on its own. It can even operate within the atmosphere." ".....Huh...?"

Milly frowned. Ordinarily, spaceships can't handle atmospheric entry or exit, let alone flight within it. It's not impossible to build such a ship, but the manufacturing costs skyrocket. Most ships stay in space and use shuttles to move between the surface and orbit.

"...But then... why do you have a shuttle attached to the belly? If the ship can do it alone, that's pointless." "Think about it... if we did that, we'd be announcing to the world that 'this isn't just any ship.' If we did that, Nightmare would have caught us long before we were even born." "I guess... that makes sense... but it still feels like a waste. I mean, the shuttle is always getting broken, and my salary keeps getting cut to pay for the repairs..."

"It's fine. Besides, the original hull has almost no cargo space... Wait, Canal! What happened to the shuttle!?" "...In this state, I can't be 100% sure, but... I can make a guess." "And?" "...Well... isn't it being crushed? By the weight of the junk...?" "....." "....." Kane and Milly stood in silence. Suddenly, Kane turned to Milly and pressed his hands together in apology. "I'm sorry! I might not be

able to pay your salary this month either!" Milly collapsed to her knees without a word.

"Oh. If you mean the shuttle, I have it stored in another warehouse."

"WHOOOOOOOA!" Kane and Milly shouted in a mix of awe and joy. They had left the repairs to Canal and asked Mariel about the shuttle.

"You are my soul sister!" Milly cried, hugging Mariel with tears streaming down her face, thinking her salary might be saved after all. Mariel looked bewildered. "I... uh... I'm glad you're happy. But it is damaged... want to take a look?" "Is that okay?" "Yes. My other work isn't that urgent. This way."

She led them to a massive warehouse at the edge of the property. Huge cranes hung from the ceiling, and ship parts were scattered everywhere. In the center sat their shuttle. The vertical stabilizer was snapped and the upper hull was scuffed—likely from hitting rocks at the bottom of the lake—but otherwise, it looked okay. It was repairable. ...As long as they had the materials.

"Um... about the materials..." Kane started. Mariel smiled brightly. "Yes. Of course, I'll give you a discount since you're staying here."

...Yep... my salary is definitely gone... Milly thought, tearing up again.

"Yo. You doing well, my Mariel?" "Yes, I'm fine. But I'm not 'yours,'" Mariel replied with a smooth smile. She was at a general store in Guark Town. The man who had called out to her was a familiar face—Beck. In a small town like this, everyone knew everyone. Mariel was known as the local junk and restoration expert; Beck was known as the local thug. He wasn't particularly dangerous, just a delinquent with a wealthy father.

"Don't be like that. How about it? You free tonight?" Beck leaned on the counter and opened a soda without asking. Despite his arrogant attitude, he pulled change out of his pocket and placed it on the counter—a sign that he was actually a bit of a coward, though he didn't realize it.

"No. I have a lot of work to do." "Come on, just one night?" "Oh? Does that mean..." she put on a mock-clueless expression, "that it's okay if something happens to that car you asked me to customize?" Beck choked back a groan. "...R-right. I forgot about that. Just get it done quickly, okay?" "Of course. It's business." "Well, hang out when you're free. It's a promise." "Yes, I promise. Once I'm 'free.'" Mariel kept her smile. Given the size of her junk piles, she would likely never be "free" for the rest of her life.

If he realized that was just her customer service smile, he might actually become someone important one day, the old shopkeeper thought silently.

Just then, a hotel landlady entered the shop. "Oh, Mariel! Long time no see." "Hello!" Mariel bowed, grateful for the interruption. "The stove you fixed is working great! Thanks. Oh, by the way... Dr. Dalton told me you picked up two injured people? One's a young man, right? You better be careful!"

Oh no, not this topic now, Mariel and the shopkeeper thought simultaneously. "A man...?" Beck straightened up from the counter. "I just helped some people who were hurt," Mariel said. She couldn't exactly say they fell from space. "A man is a man. It's dangerous for a girl living alone to take in a stranger like that." "It's fine. They're a couple, and they're injured..." "No, no. Men can't be trusted. I know! I'll come over and protect you!" "You're the one who can't be trusted," the landlady muttered, but Beck ignored her. "Don't be shy. I'll come by tonight." "Really, I'm fine." "No, you're not!" "Do you really think so? That I'm not 'fine'?" Beck started to speak, then hesitated. He scratched his cheek. "...Well... I mean... if you say so... but still, he's a stranger. Be careful. Kick him out as soon as he's healed. And let me know if anything happens." "Yes, thank you." Mariel gave him a winning smile, and Beck left the shop looking conflicted.

Night comes early in Guark Town. Or rather, the darkness is simply deeper. Beck had come to the "mountain" at the foot of Mariel's yard. He was here to see this man Mariel had picked up. He didn't know what he'd do when he saw him, but he couldn't help himself. *If he tries anything with my Mariel...* Fueling himself with a sense of self-righteousness, Beck crept through the piles of scrap.

"Someone's here! Someone's here!" A high-pitched voice echoed in the dining room. Kane, Milly, and Mariel were having tea after dinner. "What?" Milly looked at the cage. It was Dee, the myna bird. He was usually quiet, but now he was frantic. Mariel stood up, grabbed binoculars from the shelf, and looked out the window. "Someone... came?" Kane asked. "Yes. In this business, people sometimes come to steal parts. I'd give them small things if they just asked, but..."

Kane stood up. "As thanks for looking after us, I'll chase them off." In his hand, he already gripped the hilt of his **Psi-Blade**.

The junk yard at night was a landscape of black peaks. Kane moved silently through the darkness. He had been offered a flashlight, but that would just warn an intruder to hide. It was better to rely on sound and presence.

He didn't quite believe a bird could be a security system, but since he'd volunteered, he couldn't just go back and say he found no one. He wanted to catch the thief and earn some "cool points"—though he knew it probably wouldn't help lower the price of the repair parts.

Kane stopped. No light, no sound of rummaging. But he felt it. A presence. It was a feeling he knew well: raw hostility directed at him. *I see. He's standing his ground.*

Under his cape, he gripped the Psi-Blade. This weapon, used by Space Force shock troops, amplifies the user's mental strength through a headband and projects it as a blade of energy. Milly called it a "Guts Saber," but it had saved Kane's life many times.

"We're closed. Do you have business with me!?" Kane called out. After a silence, a figure stood up from behind a pile of scrap. "So you're the stranger she took in..." Kane narrowed his eyes. "From that tone, you're not just a junk thief." "Get out of here. It's for your own good. This is a warning," the man said in a low, threatening voice. "Shut up. Sneaking into someone's house and talking big... you're just a criminal." "What did you say!?"

The man—Beck—marched toward Kane. He had seen Kane leave the house and thought he looked like a "pretty boy" who would be easy to scare off. He was wearing a weird cape, but Beck figured he'd just threaten him and he'd run away. Kane's reaction was the opposite. "I guess you won't listen to advice..." "You don't even know the difference between advice and a pathetic threat. Go back to elementary school, or go home and ask your mommy." "You...!"

WHAM!

Before Beck could finish his sentence, Kane's boot slammed into his face. "Gwaaaargh!" "What's wrong? Did you run into some 'painful advice,' criminal?" Kane asked coldly.

Beck backed away and pulled a knife from his back pocket. The silver blade glinted in the moonlight. "That's it... no more mercy..." "Oho?" Kane flicked his right hand. *Vrrrrmmm!* A blade of energy nearly a meter long ignited in his hand.

Beck froze. Kane looked around, then swung the blade. A beam of light sliced through the darkness. A metal pillar nearby slid apart diagonally and crashed to the ground with a thunderous boom. "....." Beck stood frozen for a long moment. "I'll let you off just this once!" he shouted, turned on his heel, and sprinted into the darkness.

Kane pointed the tip of the Psi-Blade at Beck's retreating back. He could have shot a bolt of energy to take him down, but he hesitated. He remembered his situation. If he caused a big scene and the police got involved, "Nightmare" might find them. Beck vanished into the shadows.

"Aren't you going to chase him?" Kane spun around. Mariel was standing right behind him. "I... uh... I thought about it, but he didn't seem worth the effort. Besides, he seemed more interested in 'greeting' me than stealing." "I see." Mariel didn't let on that she knew it was Beck. She just looked at the sliced metal pillar. "By the way... that was a balancer unit for a spaceship. It was actually still usable." ".....Ugh." Kane withered under her smile. ".....I'm sorry. I'll pay for it..." "Oh, my! ♥"

"Whoa... he ran away. Beck is a total coward..." "But what was that glowing weapon!?" On a distant pile of junk, several voices whispered in the night wind. "That's a Psi-Blade," said a man named Richie. Beck's old "friends" had gathered to secretly watch Beck try to look tough for Mariel, intending to tease him about it the next day. Richie, who had moved to a different city and joined a small criminal organization, had come back to visit and suggested the "Watch Beck" party.

"Beck's got no guts... this wasn't fun at all." "I came all this way for nothing." "I don't know about that," Richie said, a smirk on his face. "A Psi-Blade user... I think things are about to get very interesting..."

Richie

"What are we going to do... with more expenses piled on top...?" "I... I wonder..." Kane muttered with an utterly dark expression in response to Canal's biting remark.

"Is the balance... really that low...?" Milly asked. "Ha ha ha. If it were just 'low,' I would have actually paid your salary last month." "....." Milly was left speechless by his weak, defeated tone.

The day after Kane had repelled the intruder, the three were discussing their future at the edge of the junk mountain where the *Sword-Breaker* was buried. If they talked inside the ship, it would interfere with the repairs. Since Canal is a hologram, she couldn't leave the ship physically, so she used an auto-repair unit to modify a sensor buoy. Now, it sat next to them as a "talking sensor buoy," allowing her to monitor the outside world and converse with them. To any onlooker, a man and woman talking to a round buoy would look incredibly bizarre.

"But since they're junk parts, they must be a bargain compared to new ones, right?" Milly asked. Kane let out a small sigh. "...Yeah... they are a bargain. But think about the total volume. Even 'bargain' prices aren't a joke when you're talking about this much."

They were repairing a 210-meter hull that had sustained significant damage. No matter how cheap the individual parts were, the total was astronomical. Adding the cost of the parts Kane had accidentally sliced up didn't change the total much, but it reinforced the fact that they needed to save every cent.

"Maybe Kane and Milly could get part-time jobs...?" Canal suggested. "And then stand out so much that Nightmare finds us and rains a shower of beams down from orbit?" Kane retorted. "....." Canal went silent.

"This is a backwater agricultural planet. I doubt any high-ranking Nightmare members are here. But," Kane continued, "there might be lower-tier or branch organizations, right?" "T-true... but... as long as you don't stand out..." "Do you think that's possible?" Milly sighed. "In a country town like this? With Kane? Wearing that cape?" "Ugh... absolutely impossible," Canal admitted.

"You know my bank balance, right?" Kane said. "I talked to Mariel about paying for the materials on an installment plan... but looking at the math, I'm not even sure we can

make the first payment." Naturally, they couldn't let Mariel hear this. Her letting them stay was half kindness and half customer service—the profit she'd make off the materials alone was enough to feed them for a while.

"Hmph. Betting our lives to fight Nightmare... only to end up bankrupt. It's too sad..." Milly sniffled. "I suppose there's no choice," Canal said with a hint of resignation. "I'll have to take it out of my secret account." "You had one of those!?" "Yes. Just in case of an emergency like this." "If you had that, you should have used it sooner so I could get my salary!" Milly wailed. "What are you saying? If I told you we had an emergency fund, you'd rely on it and keep breaking the kitchen, and Kane would keep recklessly buying capes and slashing things." ".....Ugh... well..."

"But with this... the balance in that account is going to drop significantly," Canal continued. "Even if we pay in a lump sum to avoid interest... this takes out half. Half!" "W-wait a minute!" Kane glared at the buoy. "I knew you were keeping a secret account, but how much did you hoard!? Especially since you were using *my* account to buy missiles and Vulcan ammo!" The sensor eye on the buoy looked away guiltily. "R-right! More importantly, look out! Nightmare is—" "Don't change the subject." "Nightmare is—" "Don't change the subject." "....."

The buoy... rather, Canal, fell silent for a moment. "It's... what **Alicia** left behind." "....!" Kane caught his breath at Canal's solemn tone. "Who?" Milly asked. "My grandma," Kane whispered.

Well, that accounts for about half of the total, Canal added silently to herself. One could only guess how she earned the other half based on her usual behavior. Kane sighed. "So? You were saying something about Nightmare. Did something happen?" "Yes. They aren't so naive as to think they finished us off. They are searching for us thoroughly on the interstellar 'dark net.' Please, be careful."

Rail couldn't understand it. The order to search for the *Sword-Breaker* had reached him as well. He knew Kane—they were acquaintances. But why was Nightmare looking for them? To him, Kane was just a fairly skilled, short-tempered contractor with a bizarre fashion sense. Nothing more.

But something was different now. Five cases of mysterious deaths among spaceship crews had occurred recently: a passenger ship, a transport fleet, a pirate fleet, and a patrol ship. Rumors of "Five Lights" were spreading. The cause of death was always unknown—no external wounds, just stopped hearts. He knew Nightmare was involved.

Meanwhile, **Jay Mercury**, second-in-command to **Stargazer**, was also grappling with doubt. These "accidents" were hurting the organization's interests by drawing heat from the Interstellar Police and the Space Force. When he reported these protests to Stargazer, the response was always the same: "Ignore it. What is the status of the *Sword-Breaker*?" Why did one "handyman" ship matter more than the entire Space

Force? He didn't know that Stargazer was certain the *Sword-Breaker* had survived the explosion of the *Float Down*.

"Yo, Beck. What's wrong?" Richie sat down next to Beck at the tavern. "Look at your eyes," Richie said, turning Beck toward him. "Those are the eyes of a loser. Someone who met an opponent they couldn't beat—no, someone who ran away before the fight even started." Beck flinched. He admitted everything to Richie—how the stranger at Mariel's had a sword of light and how he had fled in terror. Richie smirked internally. Now he had an excuse to go poke that Psi-Blade user.

Near evening, a car pulled up to Mariel's house. Kane stood up from the poker game. "Doesn't sound like Mariel's car. My gut says it's the guy from last night." "Kane, don't overdo it!" Milly shouted. "What do you take me for...?" "A very reasonable warning," Milly replied flatly.

Kane opened the door to find Beck standing there, with Richie leaning against a car in the background. "So you brought a friend because you couldn't win alone?" Kane taunted. "He's just a witness! I'll settle this myself!" Beck shouted. "With our fists!" Kane agreed. They faced off. Beck was larger and stronger, and he felt confident as long as the "weird glowing weapon" stayed away.

THWACK.

Kane's fist hit Beck's face, and Beck went down instantly without any fanfare. "Well, that was quick," Richie sighed, stepping forward. "My friend got knocked out in front of me. I can't exactly let that slide." "Cut the act," Kane said. "You just wanted an excuse to fight me. You knew he didn't stand a chance." Richie grinned. "You noticed? Sharp. I don't meet many Psi-Blade users. I wanted to see what you've got. Draw your weapon."

Richie pulled a black handle from behind his back. *Crack-thrum!* A black whip lashed out, sparking with blue electricity. "An electromagnetic whip? You're a weapon maniac, aren't you?" Kane ignited his Psi-Blade.

The two clashed. To Kane's surprise, the Psi-Blade didn't cut through the whip. "I'm a bit of a collector," Richie sneered. "I know the frequency of your PB-025S Psi-Blade. This whip is set to the same electromagnetic frequency. You can't cut it."

The battle began in earnest. Richie was skilled, using the whip to attack from unpredictable angles. However, Kane's movements were uncanny. Even when the whip lashed at his back, Kane dodged as if he had eyes in the back of his head. He closed the distance and knocked Richie down with a physical strike.

"Your... cape..." Richie wheezed. "Exactly," Kane nodded. The cape was like an extension of his body; he felt the whip touch it and reacted instantly. "Don't feel bad.

You aren't weak. But the man I faced before... he was on an entirely different level." Kane thought of a certain man he'd met on Planet Regun. Compared to that monster, this was child's play.

The fight ended with Mariel returning from the store and accidentally (but masterfully) taking down Richie when he tried to use her as a shield. Beck admitted that Mariel was actually a trained martial artist.

The next day, Richie was woken up by a call from his boss, **Ganias**. "Did you find any leads on the ship?" Ganias asked. Richie, who had completely forgotten his mission, lied. "Nah, nothing. But I found a weird guy using a Psi-Blade and wearing a cape..." Ganias froze. "Was his name... Kane Blueriver?" "Yeah, how'd you know?" "Read the file, you idiot!" Ganias screamed. "That's the guy Nightmare is looking for! I'm sending the whole organization to your location. Don't let them escape!"

Richie hung up and sighed. He looked at the file—Kane's face was right there. Ganias Connection was small, only thirty people. They weren't real soldiers. "I knew he was more than a hobbyist... but Nightmare?" Richie lit a cigarette. "This is getting ugly. I'm going to end up playing the typical villain role after all... how uncool."

Rematch

"Mr. Kane. You have a phone call."

Mariel said this with a smile during the morning tea break, just around ten o'clock. It was a voice-only call—no video.

"For me?" "Yes. I believe it's the person in black from two days ago."

"The person in black—!" Kane flashed back to the electromagnetic whip user and snatched the receiver.

"Yeah. What do you want?"

Hey there, Kane. Good time two days ago, wasn't it? By the way—around thirty of my acquaintances are heading to your place right now for what you might call a business call. Thought I'd give you a heads-up before they arrived.

"...You... you BASTARD!"

Call it the hazards of the profession. Don't take it personally.

"I'M GOING TO TAKE IT EXTREMELY PERSONALLY! You walk away looking all cool and collected and now you show up with a whole squad?! You're a THIRD-RATE VILLAIN after all!"

He ranted into the phone with everything he had— *CRASH!* —and slammed the receiver down, then turned to face Milly and Mariel.

"The guy from two days ago is bringing a mob! Looks like we're going to have to welcome them ourselves!"

"...Ohhh great..." Milly muttered, grimacing, while Mariel frowned slightly.

Meanwhile, in the hotel lobby of Graak Town, Richie replaced the receiver and shook his head with a wry smile. The call had been from a cheap public phone in the corner. His boss Gantias was already shouting from outside, demanding he hurry up. Ten cars or so were parked out front, loaded with men ready to move.

"Well, boss... I gave him fair warning at least..." Richie murmured, and headed for the door.

"WHAT?!" Milly's shriek rang through the living room. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE'S BRINGING THIRTY PEOPLE?!"

"What's there to say? I'll fight thirty people and knock them all out."

"THIRTY—HOW—"

Kane had already turned to Mariel. "—You hide somewhere safe. And I'm not having a fight in your front yard—I need to take it out to them. Sorry, but can I borrow a car? One of yours?"

"...Understood." Mariel paused for one second, then pulled a key from her breast pocket and placed it in Kane's hand. "There's a blue one in storage bay two. Use it. Don't worry if it gets damaged."

"I owe you one."

"It's nothing. —Please be careful."

"You too." He started for the door, then reached back and grabbed Milly's hand. "Come on."

"Wait a minute! AM I COMING TOO?!" She was already stumbling along. "Why am I coming?!"

"I need a copilot to drive the car—I'll have my hands full otherwise."

"Fine, but why ME specifically—!"

"Sorry for dragging you into this," Kane said without turning—quiet enough that Mariel didn't hear.

Milly let out a small breath. "...Fine. You owe me hazard pay."

"Yeah, I'll argue with Canal about it later."

You absolutely won't get it.

Milly thought this with complete conviction.

On the dirt road outside of town, Gantias and Richie were bouncing along in the lead car when Richie saw the problem first.

"There they come, boss! No need to go any further—they came to us!"

A single blue car was barreling down the road toward their line of ten vehicles.

Gantias trained his opera glasses on it, confirmed the faces, and crowed with delight.

"It's them! Perfect! Spread out and box them in!"

The convoy fanned across the open scrubland, surrounding the road from either side.

The blue car showed no signs of veering off course. "They're going straight at us,"

Richie observed. "Chicken race, is it? I accept!" Gantias declared.

"I wouldn't, boss. This one's not wired normally—he'll go straight through."

"....."

Gantias hesitated—and at the last second, ordered the driver to swerve. The blue car screamed past, and in its wake:

"Turn around! After them!"

From Kane's side of the windshield— "Damn! If they'd come down our side, I could've taken the door off with a Psy Blade as we passed!"

"That's exactly why they went the other way! Kane, if we keep going we'll hit the town—this is already a mess!"

"This is fate."

"It's YOUR bad luck, not fate! I think!"

"Shut up! We hit the town, fine—we just have to END it before we get too deep in!"

"MILLY! Shoot the lead cars! From the back!"

"My paralysis gun won't do anything to a CAR!"

".....WHAT?! You only brought the paralysis gun?!"

"What was I supposed to bring?! —Wait! Kane, give me the Psy Blade oscillator!"

"You know how to use it?"

"I'll aim it—YOU fire it!"

"I'm the AMMO now?!"

But Kane handed the oscillator over anyway. The energy cord was still connected to the amplifier on his belt. Milly stretched the oscillator out from both ends, bent the extended piece at an angle, and—

"GO!"

Kane focused his concentration through the bandana-shaped receptor on his forehead. Mental energy pulled from there, amplified through the device at his belt, converted to beam energy, channeled through to the oscillator—

VWOOM!

A single bolt of light slammed dead-center into one of the pursuing vehicles. The car lurched sideways, stalled, and drifted off the road. No explosion—electric vehicles didn't do that—but it was out of the fight.

"NEXT! GO!"

VWOOM! A second car went the same way. Then *CRACK-CRACK-CRACK-CRACK—* small-arms fire opened up from the pursuing vehicles, kicking up dirt around them.

"They're SHOOTING at us!" Milly reported.

"I know! Keep going!"

VWOOM! Another car down. But the enemy was shooting back in earnest now, bullets clipping the bodywork.

"They can't hit us with these!" Kane shouted.

"Easy for you to say!"

"If we thin out their numbers, the shooting stops! Go again—"

"Fine! GO!"

VWOOM! Another car carrying a machine-gun-toting passenger stopped dead. More hits on their own bodywork. Lucky shots in open country were still possible, and the vehicle had taken several.

At this rate, a critical hit was a matter of time. Better to find a place to fight on terms where skill could actually matter.

Kane floored the accelerator, pointing the nose straight at Graak Town.

"—Wait, you said we'd finish before we hit the town—!"

"Plans change. If we're going to the town anyway, might as well commit."

"Is THAT the logic?!"

He tore through town at speed—children darting for the curbs—and had just made it past the main street with four cars left on his tail when Milly grabbed the oscillator back.

"Give it! And this isn't a technique, this is destruction of public property!" *CHUNK!* A sliced streetlight tilted toward the road. The pursuers scattered—one car over-corrected and went into the ditch. Then shots from the remaining three, not risking anything in the built-up area.

CHUNK—CHUNK—CHUNK— Bullets hitting somewhere they really shouldn't have.

The car's speed dropped. Kane swore. "Somewhere important."

"What do we do?!" "Get out and fight."

"Of course we do."

They bailed from the car at a run, crossing the pavement, with three cars—and about a dozen people—in pursuit.

"Milly! Right!"

"Right... which—"

"HERE!"

Kane threw himself through the door of the nearest café, Milly right behind him.

Through the establishment—staff barely getting a look in—out the back. "Everyone out of those cars! We're catching them!" Gantias's voice boomed behind them.

Armed men scattered out of the cars and filled the side streets.

The narrow back alleys of Graak Town were full of groaning. Men with hands and feet that had stopped working, scattered on the ground—all of them belonging to the Gantias Connection.

Gantias crouched in a doorway with Richie and one other man, watching the shadows. The back-alley phase of the battle had barely started before members started going down, stripped of combat capability with alarming speed.

"...It's time, boss," Richie said.

"Not yet..."

He'd chosen this path. He could see the gap in capability clearly now—anyone could, after watching this. But he'd come this far.

"...Boss." Richie tilted his head. "Listen."

Gantias listened. Distant—but definitely getting closer—sirens.

"...Police..."

"Think we can gift-wrap both targets and vanish before they arrive, with this headcount—and keep Nightmare happy by delivering them alive?"

"...Ngh..."

"Even just the tip-off earns us points upstairs. There's value in reporting their location. And pulling back now counts for something."

"...Fine... order a full retreat. Help me, Richie."

"Happy to."

Richie helped Gantias pull fallen members to their feet and began moving them toward the remaining vehicles. And—very quietly—smiled.

"Mr. Kane. Phone call again."

It was that evening. Kane and Milly had slipped away from both police and Gantias's men, caught a ride back to Mariel's place, and were sitting on the sofa catching their breath when Mariel extended the phone.

"For me? Who is—don't tell me—"

Mariel's nod confirmed it. "The person in black."

Kane took the receiver. "—Yeah."

Hey. Sorry about earlier.

"You—"

Relax. We're done with you—for our part. But I figured you should know: this whole operation wasn't about getting back at you for our fight. Our organization is a sub-organization of a larger one. And that larger one's been looking for you.

"...Don't tell me—"

Knew it, did you? Yeah. Nightmare. My boss got impatient and jumped ahead—that's what all that was. But by now, Nightmare itself probably has your location. Wondering if you can win the next round too?

"_"

Kane started to say something cutting—and stopped. He noticed something.

"...Hey. Question. Why are you telling me all this?"

Well. I thought maybe it'd put the fear into you a bit.

"...Yeah. I understand perfectly."

Anyway. Take care. See you around.

"Yeah. Consider us square."

On the other end of the line, he could almost hear Richie's wry smile before the click. Kane set the phone down and turned to Milly. "Come on. We're going to the Swordbreaker."

"Hmm?"

"Come's coming. Nightmare itself—"

He kept his voice low as they walked, so it wouldn't carry to Mariel's ears.

* * *

Back in the hotel lobby, Richie replaced the receiver and leaned against the wall with a shrug. The Connection had gone home. He'd been kept behind as an observer—to watch the situation until Nightmare arrived.

"—Richie-san—"

He turned. Beck was standing there.

"I did what you asked—I called the police. What was that even about?"

"...Took you long enough," Richie muttered to himself. *That's why I ended up having to shoot my own man.* He kept that part in his head.

"Couldn't be helped. The police station's clear out in the middle of nowhere out here. I was on the roof of the department store watching like you said, and the second I saw cars rolling in I called it in—said there was a shootout, come stop it."

"Fair enough. I owe you one." Richie offered his hand. "Come on."

"...But what was any of that...?"

"Nothing important." He clapped Beck on the shoulder. "Let's go get a drink. My treat."

"— Our systems check is complete!" Canal's voice rang sharp through the cockpit corridors. "Submarine vehicle has retreated, confirmed clear!"

Kane and Milly stopped what they'd been doing—tidying the ship—and looked at each other.

In silence they both nodded. Then they were running for the bridge.

Yesterday's phone call. They'd told Mariel they were moving back aboard to check the repairs and get things organized—the real reason, of course, was to be ready for Nightmare the moment they arrived.

The shuttle was already repaired. If it came to it, just Kane and Milly could take the shuttle and slip away while Canal handled things unseen—but losing Canal, losing the Swordbreaker, would make the whole thing meaningless.

"Status report, Canal!"

"Engines are at minimum viable level for atmospheric and orbital flight! Life support secure! Weapons: seven standard beam cannons operational, and the Leap Railgun—twenty shots, but with their maneuverability I doubt we can hit them with those. The Psy-Blaster is functional—barely, maybe four or five shots before overheat. Psy-Barrier and Plasma Blast are both offline."

Canal was visible now—holographic projection restored, voice clearer than before. She'd clearly prioritized that along with restoring the cockpit. Milly's seat still had scorch marks on the back, but there was no time to care about that.

Kane and Milly dropped into their seats.

"Target?"

"Closing speed—it's them. Ragudo Mezegis."

"...Can we actually win this?" Milly asked quietly.

"We win," Kane said, and the certainty in his voice had nothing to do with calculation. Running with minimal repairs—the option of quietly fixing the engine and bolting from the planet had been on the table. But against Ragudo Mezegis, even undamaged, they'd be caught before reaching phase-drive range. And attempting a planet-proximity phase jump again was insanity.

So: wait. Repair what could be repaired. Meet the fight with the best condition achievable. That had been the group decision.

"How?" Milly pressed.

Kane gave a half-reckless grin. "Fight them somewhere they're not used to. Draw them in. Atmospheric combat."

"Wait a MINUTE!" Canal's voice shot up immediately. "I've never done atmospheric combat! Not once!"

"Neither have I!"

"Then why are we DOING THIS?!"

"Same goes for them! And they don't know this world—I do! Trust me!"

"How does anyone even trust you right now—!" Canal wailed—but her hands were already moving toward the engine controls.

"Canal! Begin startup!"

"Engine startup, acknowledged!"

The low rumble of the engines filled the hull. And then Canal's face went tight.

"Engine output rising slower than predicted! It'll take a moment before we can launch!"

"HOLD ON—"

"Ragudo Mezegis accelerating! Incoming fire!"

"WE'RE SITTING DUCKS DOWN HERE!"

Milly looked at the sky in horror.

Far overhead, Ragudo Mezegis had found them and taken aim—surveying the data, confirming the energy signature under the junk pile, locking all weapon systems onto the target. *—Found you—Vorfeed!*

Every gun rotated to bear on the coordinates. The energy signature was growing—engine output increasing. At Vorfeed's performance level, a sudden sprint to altitude was possible even in this condition.

But not happening. Which meant the repairs were incomplete. The Swordbreaker was still crippled.

—Goodbye—buried in junk where you lay!

And Ragudo Mezegis opened fire.

"Ragudo Mezegis firing!" Canal screamed.

"ENGINE?!" "Almost—just—NOW!"

"—Swordbreaker, LAUNCH!"

ROAAAAR!

The engines howled. Junk scattered like an explosion. And the Swordbreaker rose. Mariel stared from the window of her house. She couldn't believe her own eyes—and the unreality of it was doubled by the glass. It felt like watching a film. A very strange film.

Only a few days ago this had been a quiet, ordinary place. The most dramatic things that happened were Richie's assault case from a few years back, the occasional traffic accident, Beck and his friends causing minor trouble.

And then a spaceship had fallen into her lake. And then—beams falling from the sky. A spaceship launching from her own front yard.

She'd been the one who buried it there. She could only stand and watch as the Swordbreaker arced into the sky—

The Swordbreaker cleared the lake surface. "Ragudo Mezegis coming in from directly above! Fire incoming!"

"They're coming right down on us!" Kane was already working the controls, throwing the ship into a banking roll. The right wing carved through the lake's surface, sending up a wall of spray—

Then the fire came down, and landed behind them in the churning wake.

"Why is everything so sluggish?!" "Partly the verniers—and partly air resistance! Same reason Ragudo Mezegis's first shot missed—the atmosphere bent its beam!"

"So they can't do their crazy maneuvering either!"

"Probably not as extreme as in vacuum—but don't assume that means—"

—Don't flatter yourself, Vorfeed.

Ragudo Mezegis's "voice" hit all of them simultaneously. *—So you intended to use air resistance to blunt my speed. But I can still dodge anything you fire. You have no Psy-Barrier—raise it and you drop like a stone. You're outmatched and out of options.*

"Shut up, isoceles!" Kane snapped back. "Go back to skittering around in the corners where you belong—I'll squash you in a minute!"

Canal, deadpan: "I'm relaying that to Ragudo Mezegis."

The babbling of lesser beings doesn't merit a reply.

"Prove it!"

"Ragudo Mezegis closing from behind! They have the angle!" Canal announced.

"What do we have back there?!" "Two standard beam cannons!"

"Fire! Milly!"

"On it!"

The rear guns blazed. *—Pointless—* A sideslip, and both beams went wide.

"Nothing! And it's still coming!"

"Good. On my mark—next round into the lake!"

"...What?"

"Just DO IT!"

—Won— Ragudo Mezegis had already decided.

The one thing that had worked against them in this fight was the atmosphere itself—but even accounting for reduced maneuverability, they were still fast enough

to dodge whatever the wounded Swordbreaker could fire. And without the Psy-Barrier, one good hit would settle it.

The enemy fired again—into the lake this time, a wasted shot. While Ragudo Mezegis watched with something close to contempt, figuring out the trap—

Raise altitude to avoid steam and spray as a targeting disturbance—that's what they want. Then they try to catch us moving upward—

That was the plan. Ragudo Mezegis held position, refusing to move.

But the beam fire from the Swordbreaker came anyway—the Psy-Blaster this time, cutting through the rising steam and turbulent air, trajectory bent but still coming—The evasion was just barely slower than it needed to be. The ship felt heavier than normal.

What—

CRACK!

For the first time. The Swordbreaker's shot hit Ragudo Mezegis.

"HIT!"

"Now the REAL attack!"

Milly's Leap Railgun deployed its transit chips at range—spreading the miniature jump-devices around the area where Ragudo Mezegis was struggling to recover—and one by one the inertia-neutralizing chips that surrounded Ragudo Mezegis's hull were yanked out of position and dumped into empty space.

AAAAAAHHHHHH—!

Ragudo Mezegis spun sideways, losing all directional control, hull scraping the lake surface as the momentum that had always been nullified came flooding back in a lopsided tide.

"KNOW WHAT STEAM DOES?!" Kane's voice rang through the ship. "The steam density we created—it coated your hull! Your control chips were fighting your weight plus condensation the entire time! THAT'S why your response was off!"

They'd understood too late. One chip lost was enough to detonate the whole elegant math of inertia-canceling—suddenly one side heavy, thrust uncompensated, rotation impossible to stop.

"—Time to finish this—!" "—YEAH!"

Beam cannons and railgun opened up simultaneously.

BOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOM!

The barrage hit Ragudo Mezegis broadside. Hit. And hit. And hit—

GRRRAAAHHHH—!

FLASH.

In a single instant—Ragudo Mezegis became light. The explosion rocked the lake—spray and steam and something like a scream—

And when the rain fell, and the water droplets came down in the aftermath—Ragudo Mezegis was gone.

"...You're leaving," Mariel said.

"Yes," Kane replied with a small nod.

After defeating Ragudo Mezegis, simply flying off would have been the most stylish option—but they'd left the shuttle behind, and without it they'd need to launch, dock, and retrieve it in orbit. It was Kane who'd pilot the shuttle back up.

The Swordbreaker wasn't fully repaired. But staying here invited the next wave. Nightmare didn't run out of resources.

"...Do you have to ask about...?"

"There are things in this world better not known," Mariel said. She smiled slightly.

"Instead—"

She reached out and pressed something into his hand.

A slip of paper. In neat handwriting— *Invoice. For parts destroyed when your vessel launched—*

The number was substantial.

"...I'll pay all of it," Kane said in a very small voice, clutching the invoice and shedding what he hoped were dignified tears.

In a field on the edge of town, Richie and Beck leaned against a car and watched two lights rising into the sky.

"...What was all that, in the end?" Beck murmured.

"No idea," Richie replied around his cigarette.

They weren't the only spectators—half the town had cars parked around the lake after the overhead firefight. When you have beams falling from space into a lake and two spacecraft brawling above the water, keeping people away is unreasonable.

Only Beck and Richie understood that the man called Kane was at the center of it all.

The two of them—and only them—among all the bystanders.

"Well—it was interesting, anyway," Richie said, tossing the cigarette butt. "Town, drinks, refill. Come on."

He got in the car without waiting for an answer. Beck slid into the passenger seat.

"...So we're back to normal life after this?"

"Stimulation's best in small doses, from time to time. Normal life, with that—that's a good life."

Richie started the engine. Back toward Graak Town.

* * *

Epilogue

The lake was dyed the colors of sunset.

"All systems check clear!" "Submarine vehicle withdrawal confirmed?" "Give it one more moment..."

The team in the small utility boat watched the lake surface in tense silence, while a battered speaker crackled with the countdown—

"—Zero!"

Then, after one more beat beyond zero—

...thud...

Something low and concussive, not quite sound, not quite shaking, reached them from deep beneath the lake.

Mariel stood at the edge of the water, watching without really seeing, thinking about the strange visitors—Kane and the others—who had come and gone.

What had they been? They'd fought each other in the air with spaceships, and then left. The military was out there now, she supposed, raising the wreck from the lake.

Too far to see with binoculars.

An unrelated world. A world she had no business being part of.

The orange surface rippled and swelled. The first thing to breach the surface was an enormous buoy—the same sunset-orange as the water—inflated by an explosive charge from the salvage team below. Old technology, still in use, just refined. Then, with a rush and thunder of displaced water:

A black spacecraft. Rising from the lake, water sheeting off its hull, rising against the orange-lit sky like a dark tower. Like something that should not be named.

"...Hell of a slow assignment..." one of the crew on the Space Navy survey vessel

Odd-Eye, in Jennoh's orbital space, muttered to his magazine. "Military and police are better off when nothing happens—and it's never been this nothing before."

"Complaining won't help..."

"I know. Still. An atmospheric dogfight between actual spaceships and all we get is the paperwork."

The *Odd-Eye*'s captain had heard reports of "atmospheric-combat-capable spacecraft" and connected it to the recent fleet incident in the Kalua system, and sent a report to naval command—who had classified it immediately and dispatched a direct investigation team. The survey crew on the ship in orbit were the people who had drawn the short straw of staying with the ship while the ground team went down.

Nothing to do but maintain position, take scheduled check-ins, and wait. Nothing had happened—

Until the warning alarm went off, suddenly and hard.

Bweeeee—Bweeee—Bweee—

Confusion ran through the bridge before the alarm. "What is—"

The automatic sensors had detected something. High energy—massive. The navigator slammed the display:

"Energy spike—origin: *behind the moon*?!"

BOOM.

A single beam of light came down and hit Jennoh.

The white light scattered the sunset red, struck the lake—and the water, the salvage team, the survey vessels, and the remains of Ragudo Mezegis, were all returned to dust.

On the *Odd-Eye* above: "—WHAT WAS—"

"Target of that beam was NOT this vessel!" "Target was—"

Something vast, something ancient, something waiting beyond the reach of the moon's shadow had done this. Not Ragudo Mezegis—Ragudo Mezegis was already gone.

Something else. Something that knew what Ragudo Mezegis was, and knew exactly where it had fallen.

Mariel didn't understand what had happened.

A column of light had struck the far side of the lake. A flash of white. Then, instinctively, she had thrown herself flat before she even understood why.

The sound arrived after a delay. Not a sound. The air itself cracking. The windows—all of them—gone in an instant.

She lost consciousness for a while, perhaps. When she raised her head, the sky had gone from orange to deep blue-black.

She couldn't hear well.

When hearing came back, she heard something. A bird calling. She got up quickly and turned—

The bird in its cage was thrashing wildly, unnaturally. Then it was still.

She turned back to the sky. In the darkness above, five lights burned—a five-pointed shape, glowing against the stars.

She stared.

A laser hologram? Something? It made her feel strange. Frightened, without knowing why.

Who was doing this? Why?

She stood there, staring—and noticed that the bird had gone silent.

She looked at the cage. The bird lay on the floor of the cage, not moving.

She looked back at the five lights.

She remembered the news from a few weeks ago. Something about a fleet of ships that had witnessed a strange glowing formation in space—and every crew member had died of unknown causes.

It couldn't be. Surely. But—

A dark unease spread through her chest.

Her breathing was getting harder. Maybe it was just her imagination—

The crew of the Swordbreaker only learned that every living person on Jennoh was dead sometime later—

Afterword

According to Einstein's theory, objects moving at high speed within an inertial reference frame experience a slowing of time relative to a stationary observer. The so-called "Urashima effect."

Which is to say: the faster Hajime Kanzaka works, the slower time passes for Hajime Kanzaka—and so, while from the author's perspective only about four months have elapsed, something close to four years has passed for the rest of the world. This is the explanation for the delay.

...

I'm sorry, everyone. That was my fault.

There are reasons for the gap, but reasons are reasons—a novelist's worth is measured in what they write. So here we are. Thank you enormously for your patience. Volume Four of Lost Universe:

Nightmare Born

is now in your hands.

At signing events, at conventions, in letters—you told me again and again. Finally, it's finished. Whether it was worth the wait—that's for you to decide.

As promised in the outline: people die, spaceships explode. (That makes me sound like a terrorist, come to think of it.)

The full five-volume story is now down to its final volume. Volume Four is the calm before the final storm—the settings and backstory I'd been deliberately not describing, certain connections to a certain other series of mine, and the outcome of the battle itself—all of it comes to light in the final volume.

In one sense, this volume is the night before the climax. The buried history of Kane and Canal's relationship, the setting details that haven't been explained—they begin to surface here.

On the topic of SF and magic—I once read that "sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." The Dark Stars of this story are exactly that. How to write them convincingly was the core challenge.

Incidentally—among the unexpected turns the world took while I was writing this—a recording format called "Phase Drive" appeared in the computer world, with a name that overlaps almost exactly with my "phase-transition drive." That caught me off guard more than anything else.

SF had a period of being seen as commercially difficult, but recently—perhaps—that's shifting slightly. I hope so. As a member of the human species, there is something self-evidently right about feeling the pull of "the black of space" and "an attack from orbital altitude." We have a finite Earth and a growing population—the future has to be outward. Go, Mars probes. Let's build space colonies.

Which brings up the question of whether we really do need to exceed the speed of light. Though I've also been puzzling lately over whether "time" is actually a physical phenomenon at all, or merely a framework we use to measure physical change—

...That's a tangent. None of it is relevant.

In any case. Only the final volume remains. This time—truly—I will try to have it in your hands as quickly as I possibly can...

See you in the final volume: *When Darkness Ends*.

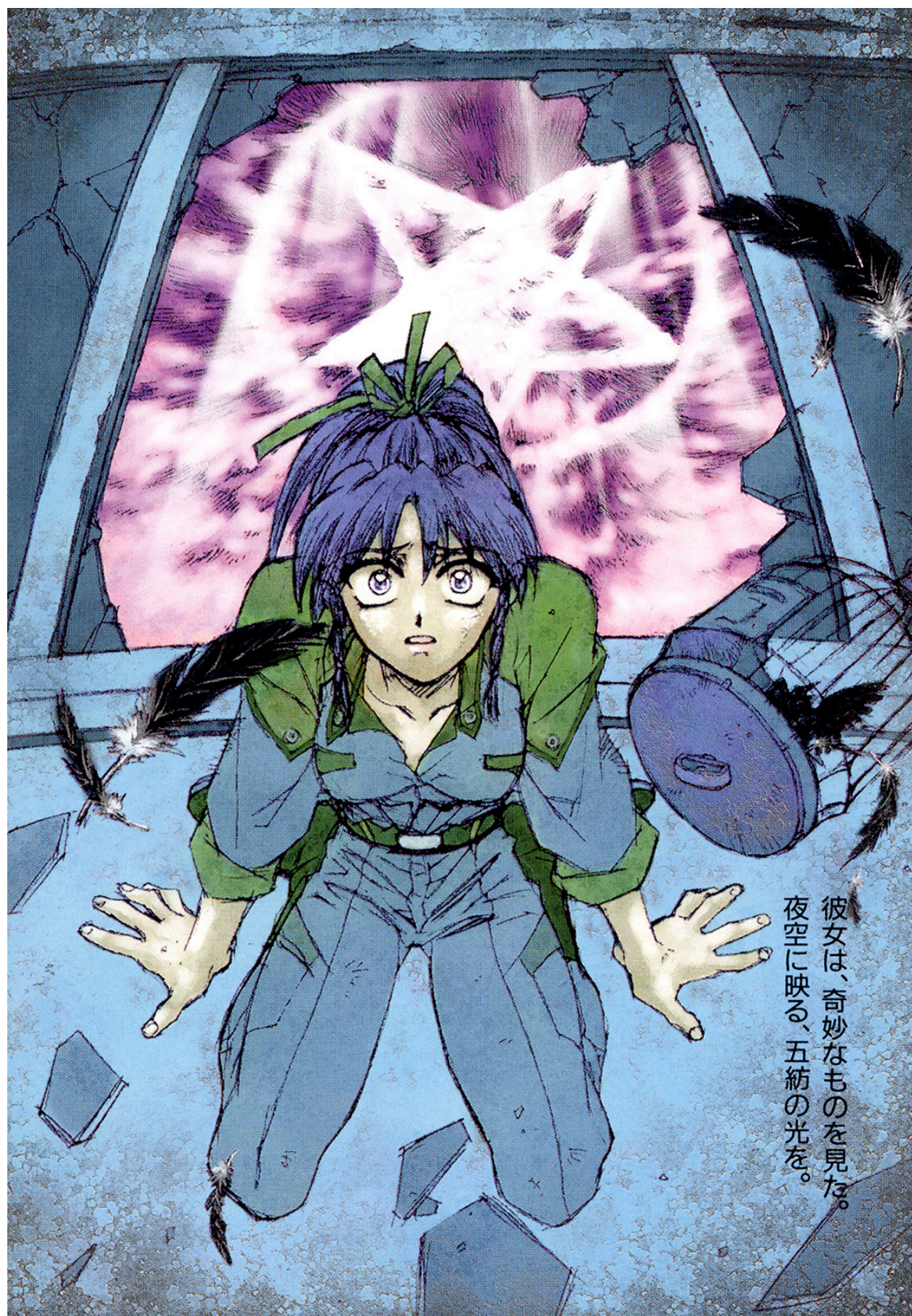
白スト・ユニバース④

悪夢 生まれる

「……やっぱり……やめようよお……おにいちゃん……」
「バカだなアリス。見つからなきゃあいいんだよ」
小さな声で言いながら、金色の髪の少年は、
闇の中へと入り込んだ――







彼女は、奇妙なものを見た。
夜空に映る、五紘の光を。







